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THE COUNTESS ZITA'S DEFENSE

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The Countess Zita's Defense;

OR,

NICK CARTER IN THE PALACE OF A KING.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE PALACE OF THE KING.

"It is almost incredible, Nicholas," said Prince Rupert, frowning as the thought in his mind took definite form. "I will admit to you that I have never personally liked Count Herbert von Linmark, but I have attributed my dislike to unreasoning prejudice only. But to think that he has dared to do this thing! I tremble to think what my brother, the king, will do to him when he learns the truth." And Prince Rupert drummed with his fingers against the arm of the chair in which he was seated.

"Need his majesty be told about it at all?" asked Nick Carter. "It strikes me, prince, that it would be decidedly better not to do so. I know his rages; I have seen him in one of them and—they are detrimental to his own health, prince."

The prince smiled, and after a moment he said whimsically:

"Why not stick to our agreement made in New York City, Nicholas? You promised then to address me by my given name. If you only realized how sick I become of being 'Royal Highnessed' and 'Princed,' and how absolutely impossible it is for one of my own countrymen to call me 'Rupert' without offending the entire nation, you would understand what a delicious change it is to have an American like yourself for a friend, and to hear you talk to me, not as if you were a prince also, but as if I were not one. Only an American could do it, you know."*

"All right, Rupert," laughed the detective, "since you insist—only I don't think it would be well to do it in public."

"No; hardly that," assented the prince, smiling.

"To return to the subject we were discussing, why need the king be told about the villainy of the count?"

"It had not occurred to me that any other course were possible."

"I think it not only possible, but important—Rupert."

*See No. 589 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY, "A Plot Within a Palace."

"Tell me what your ideas on the subject are, Nicholas."

"I think if you should summon the count to you here and——"

"Pardon me if I interrupt you right there, Nick. If I did what you suggest, prince though I am, I would not be able to keep my hands off him. I have lived through every degree of utter rage that I ever imagined while listening to the story you have just told me. Dechra is not only my niece, but she is as dear to me as one of my own children. Of course, the amazing plot she entered into herself, to free her own person from royal surroundings, is reprehensible and cannot be condoned, and it is because of that that the count found an opportunity to do his own plotting. But however incensed I may be at Dechra, I am none the less enraged—I am more so, in fact—at the count for the fiendish part he has played. It is incredible. I cannot comprehend how he dared to do such a thing. I—— On my word, Nicholas Carter, if he were to appear before me now I greatly fear that I should assert my royal prerogative and kill him."

"Have you such a prerogative? Such a right?"

"Oh, yes."

"I did not know that this was an absolute monarchy," smiled the detective.

"Nor is it. But who would there be to punish me? We need not discuss that point, however."

"No."

"But I will not see the man. I will delegate the power to you, if you will use it, and——"

"Would that he quite the proper thing to do, Rupert? Pardon me, but I am not only a foreigner; I am an American. I might almost say a hated American."

"Hated by such as Count Herbert—yes; but that should be an honor, Nicholas."

"Shall I continue with what I had to suggest?"

"Yes. Go on."

"If one in authority like yourself were to tell the count plainly that everything is known, if he were assured that to remain here meant certain death, and if he were, in effect, ordered out of the country on pain of death if he remained, don't you think that he would not only lose no time in absenting himself, but that he would change his name, and so lose his identity?"

"Yes. I think all that. But I fear it would not be wise."

"Why?"

"I know Count Herbert much better than you do, Nick."

"No doubt."

"He is a relentless hater. He belongs to a powerful family in this kingdom. Abroad, in other countries, under an assumed name, he could work much harm to us here, with his plotting and his thirst for vengeance for fancied wrongs."

The detective shrugged his shoulders.

"It is my practise," he said, "never to cross bridges until I come to them. My present concern is for the king—and for the princess."

There were several moments of silence after that, broken finally by the prince, who abruptly changed the subject.

"I wonder if Dechra has made her presence in the palace known as yet?"

"I doubt it," replied Nick. "I think the information would have been brought to you at once had she done so."

"Most likely."

"Besides, it is yet very early for the palace to be astir."

"By Jove! That's so. I had forgotten that. It can't be more than——"

"It isn't yet seven o'clock."

"You're right. We have been talking together so long that I had an idea it was much later, and I am so used to having the lights switched on in this room at all hours of the day that I hadn't thought about the time. It isn't daylight yet, is it?"

"Barely."

"What time was it when you brought the princess back to the palace, Nick?"

"About four; a little earlier, possibly."

"I have been so excited while you were telling the story that I don't think I have followed you clearly all through it. May I ask a few more questions about it?"

"Certainly."

"The Countess Zita has been Dechra's confidante throughout all this business, has she not, Nick?"

"Yes."

"From the beginning?"

"Yes."

"And you were wise enough to guess that such was the situation the moment you took charge of the case."

"No; I did guess it, but there would have been no

way whatever of establishing the fact had not the countess chosen to confide in me. I have already told you about that. How she was concealed behind the curtains in the small private library when the king chose to quarrel with me, and when I answered him back in a manner he had never heard before."

"Trust you for doing that," said the prince, smiling.

"There was no other way to do, Rupert."

"Oh, I quite understand that."

"You see, it was like this: Countess Zita had known about the princess' love for Major Dick Hartwell—my countryman, confound him! although he is a fine fellow—she had known all about that affair from the beginning. The princess had confided in her from the start; and when Princess Deehra finally did disappear, after the scene with her father, and go to the house of the Englishwoman who was to look after her, Zita was quite as much interested in the romantic side of it as the princess herself."

The prince nodded.

"But when the princess did not keep her word with the countess, when she sent no message, and when finally, in her anxiety, the countess sought the house to find news of her and found that she had gone, she knew that something not on the program had happened."

"I suppose that was why the countess asked you to go on that expedition with her at dead of night——"

"It was after my quarrel with the king that the countess made the suggestion to me."*

"Yes. I remember that you told me that."

"I waited in the library, as she told me to do, until Annette, her maid, came for me. It was at midnight. You know that Count Herbert had overheard a part of the conversation between Zita and me. Not enough to tell him much, but sufficient to get him guessing."

The prince nodded comprehendingly, although that was an Americanism.

"The count had also seen that little byplay, when Zita was coquetting with me. Taken altogether, it had made him suspicious, and, in the light of what we understand now—that he all the while knew where the princess was confined—it is no wonder."

"No."

"So Annette, when she met me to conduct me to her mistress, left me to make my way alone, assuring me that the count would be on the watch somewhere, and that she had been seen to leave the rooms of the countess."

"Yes, yes. I know all that; and how you did meet the count in the corridor and dropped him through an open window into the park before he had a chance to recognize you; and how you went to Zita's room, and she told you the whole story, and that you presently left the palace with her by that secret exit, that even I knew nothing about till you told me; how you went with her to the house where Deehra should have been living in safety, according to her plans, but only to find the house deserted. What I am hazy about is this: Was Zita with you when you did find and rescue Deehra and her English woman friend?"

"No. I had brought Zita back to the palace, and had just left her when it occurred to me that I would return to that house alone—and you will remember that it was in the house across the street that the princess and her friend were confined."

"Yes," exclaimed the prince, starting to his feet angrily; "actually imprisoned there! Actually fastened to the beds upon which they were sleeping, so that none could go near the window, and watched over by a jaileress! It is too horrible! It would make the king mad with rage."

"No doubt," said Nick coolly, "and that is why the king must know nothing about it."

"After you had rescued her you took her to the entrance to the secret passage you have described, and left her there, after she had stepped inside. It seems to me, Nick, as if you should have seen her all the way to Zita's apartment."

"You forget, prince, that Zita had probably retired by that time—it was two hours since I left her."

"Yes, yes; that is true. But I am anxious, all the same. I will send for Countess Zita at once, even if it is early. Deehra must know that I am aware of her presence in the palace. It is a strangely mixed affair, and I hardly know what is best to do."

CHAPTER II.

THE COUNTESS ZITA'S APARTMENT.

The prince reached out his hand toward the bell, and then withheld it.

"The Englishwoman was with the princess when you left her?" he asked.

*See No. 589 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

"Certainly."

"Did Deehra tell you anything about what she intended to do, in order to make her peace with the king?"

"No. There was no time. It was very cold. We had to walk from the place of imprisonment to the palace. I merely took them to the little secret door through the wall which admits to the secret passage, and opened it and left them there."

"She was going directly to Zita?"

"Yes. Of course. The passageway leads directly to her apartment—that is, to the one she occupies."

"I know."

"I advised the princess to rouse Zita, and—well, I thought it wise to leave all else to the developments of this morning. Then I came to you here."

"I hope that Deehra was grateful to you for what you had done."

"Naturally."

"Do you suppose she is still infatuated with that—what's his name?—Hartwell?"

"I think she is in love with him; yes."

"It's a foolish business all the way through, on her part, Nick. How in the world could she or he suppose that she, a royal princess, would be permitted to wed with any one out of her class?"

"I think her plot, as to that, was very cleverly laid," replied the detective, smiling. "Let me tab the things off on my fingers again for your benefit."

"Well?"

"Two years were to elapse, according to her plans, as related to me by Countess Zita, before there was to be even a meeting between herself and Major Hartwell. One of those years had already passed—fifteen months, to be exact. Princess Deehra remained here in the palace one entire year after Hartwell resigned his commission in the United States Army, and also his post as military attaché here. You recall that?"

"Yes."

"That was to avoid the appearance of any connection between him and her going away."

"Well?"

"The second point of her plan was that she was to disappear from the palace, but she was to remain here in the city, in that house furnished for her by the Englishwoman. She believed that if a search was made for her, nobody would think of looking so near the palace; and, besides, in going there, she merely took the place of another woman who had played the part for her for three months before she disappeared."

"I know. I know."

"She was to remain here close to the walls of her father's palace until the search for her, if search there was, should have grown cold. Then she was to go to London with the Englishwoman, and live there more or less openly with her chaperon, under an assumed name. She was to go upon the street, to the theaters, to permit herself to be seen. If people saw her who knew the princess by sight, they would merely be struck by the resemblance; that is all."

"It was clever. There is no denying that."

"At the end of another six months Hartwell was to be permitted to appear, as I remember it; but I think that another year was to elapse, while Deehra and her chaperon traveled, before a wedding was to take place."

The prince nodded; then he said:

"Deehra's whole scheme was first to lose her identity; then, after she had lost it, to marry the man she loves."

"Exactly."

"It would have succeded, too. The very boldness of it would have rendered it a success."

"I think so."

"But for the interference of Count Herbert. I don't know, Nick, but that we ought to thank him for what he has done, rather than——"

"If you view it that way, of course."

"Confound it, I don't view it that way. Why didn't the scoundrel keep his hands off her? How did he dare——"

"There, there, sir. It will do no good to lose your temper again about it. His whole plot, as you well know, was to influence your august brother, and even you, so as to allow him to marry into the royal family; to marry her."

"By——" The prince leaped to his feet again with uplifted fist, but what he was about to say was never uttered, for in leaping to his feet he inadvertently struck the bell on the table beside him, and, realizing that an attendant would appear almost at once, he sank back again upon his chair, scowling.

Nick smiled broadly.

"That was an interruption of a new sort, Rupert," he said. "You literally interrupted yourself that time," he said it to make the prince smile, and he succeeded, so that when the lackey appeared a moment later it was a

smiling countenance that His Royal Highness turned toward him.

"Who is astir in the palace, Emile?" he demanded.

"Very few, your highness," was the reply. "His majesty has gone for his morning ride."

"Count Herbert, or Captain Hensau—have you observed either of them this morning?"

"Captain Hensau rode with the escort to His Majesty, your highness. Count Herbert I have not seen, sir."

"Is any one—— Oh, pshaw! Has the Countess Zita appeared yet this morning?"

"I do not think so, your highness."

"My compliments to the countess, Emile, and say that I will be glad if she will receive me in her private parlor as soon as possible. You may remain outside her door and bring the message to me yourself, when she is prepared."

When the man was gone, Nick turned a smiling face toward the prince and said:

"You were cut out for what you are—a bluff naval officer, rather than a diplomat, Rupert, I see."

"I suppose so. You will accompany me when I go to interview Zita?"

"If you think it wise."

"Of course I think it wise. Why should it not be?"

"Well, there is one reason. You must not forget that Count Herbert is my enemy and will do much to ruin me in your brother's eyes.

"Well, I am prepared to state, if necessary, that you passed the night in my rooms, at cards with me—or that we went abroad together, and only returned this morning."

"Very good, sir. In that case, don't you think it would be well before we go to the countess that we should show ourselves together in different parts of the palace?"

"That isn't a bad idea. As soon as Emile returns, we will——"

"He is here now."

"The compliments of the Countess Zita to your royal highness, and she will be honored to receive your royal highness in twenty minutes from now," said Emile.

The prince, accompanied by the detective, walked through the corridor to the side entrance of the palace and stepped out into the park. They strolled from there around to another entrance, where they entered. They walked into the office of the chief equerry, and they encountered the chamberlain, who had just risen; then they walked through the main corridor, meeting many of the officers of the household, and finally ascended the broad staircase to the upper floor, and so made their way by devious routes, finally to the door of the countess' apartments.

During this time Nick had noticed that more than one of the officers of the household stared at him in some surprise; he even saw a nudge or two, slyly given, all of which told him that his suspicions had been only too correct, and that the tongue of Count Herbert had not been idle.

Annette and another maid were awaiting them at the door, and Nick could see a twinkle in Annette's eyes as he passed her, although she was far too well trained to make any sign that she knew him.

The countess was awaiting them in the center of her pleasant parlor, into which the winter morning sun was now shining brightly.

She was as much at ease as if she had not been called from her beauty-sleep and compelled to make a hasty toilet to receive the prince, and Nick thought her even more beautiful now than she had appeared before.

She curtsied low as they approached her.

"Your royal highness does me a great, as well as an unexpected, honor," she said, smiling. "And, Mr. Carter, I am glad to welcome you also, although I do not remember to have received so early a call from two gentlemen before. His highness has never honored my little parlor before, since I have been in the palace;" and she curtsied again, smiling with mischief.

"Nonsense, Zita!" exclaimed the prince. "We came to see Deehra. Where is she?"

"To see Deehra! To see the princess? Your royal highness knows——"

"Tut, tut, Zita. Where is she? I wish to see her at once."

"Alas, sir——"

"Is she not here?"

"No, your royal——"

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed the prince, sinking upon a chair.

CHAPTER III.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE PRINCESS.

They formed a strange group, those three—the prince, Nick Carter, and the Countess Zita.

It is doubtful which of the three was the more greatly surprised by those questions and replies, Zita because they were asked of her, or the two men because of the answers she gave.

Nick instantly took up the line of questioning, first glancing around to assure himself that there were no listeners.

"Do you mean, Zita," he demanded, forgetting at the moment to give her her title, "that you have not seen the princess?"

"Certainly not. What subterfuge is this, Mr. Carter?" she replied angrily.

"It is not a subterfuge, countess, believe me," he replied.

"But you know very well that we did not find her, and that——"

"Pardon me a moment, countess, and I will explain."

"I would be glad if you would do so."

"After I left you and turned away from the entrance to the secret passage—— I have told his highness all about it, countess."

"Well, sir, well?"—she was drumming impatiently upon the floor with her slippered foot.

"After I left you there, it occurred to me to return to the scene of our excursion, last night, and to go over it again alone. I had studied the house we entered together earlier—had studied it for a long time and carefully, and was coming away, when I chanced to glance at the upper windows of the old house on the opposite side of the street from it. You remember it?"

"Yes, yes."

"I saw a signal at one of the upper windows."

"A signal?"

"At first I was not sure of it, but——"

"Why go over all that again, Nicholas?" asked the prince wearily. "This is a shock, but I must admit that I feared something of the kind."

"I must explain to the countess, your highness. It is necessary that she should know."

"Oh, yes, please!" cried Zita.

"It was a signal that I saw—something white at the upper window. I will not go into detail. It is sufficient that I was convinced that something was not as it should be over in that house. I forced my way into it. I made my way to the top of it. I forced a door there, and I found the princess and the Englishwoman who was caring for her, as you told me."

"Yes, yes, yes."

"They were prisoners of Count Herbert, as you suspected. I got them away after tying up the woman who was guarding them, and, after some little other trouble not worth mentioning, I brought them here to you——"

"That is not true, Mr. Carter."

"Wait, countess. I brought them to the palace; to the entrance to the secret passage that connects with this room. I opened the door in the wall for them, and saw them enter and close it. The princess said she would come directly to you."

"Is all that quite true, Mr. Carter?" asked the countess coldly.

"Do you doubt it, countess?"

"No; and yet—*why is she not here?*"

"Alas, that is what we must lose no time in determining."

"Why did you not enter with them?"

"Countess, it was almost four in the morning. You had probably retired. I knew the princess to be as familiar with the passage as you were; you had told me that."

"Yes."

"You must remember that I had been suspected of going to your rooms last night; that the door and the approaches to it were doubtless watched for my return. I could not reenter the palace by this route—could I?"

"N-no."

"I supposed the princess to be entirely safe. I had every reason to believe she was so the moment she passed the entrance to that secret passage. You must admit that."

"Y-yes."

His royal highness the prince had already told me how, if I had ocacsion to do so, I might enter or leave the palace at any time through his apartments without disturbing the guards, and with such good news as I had to impart to him, I did not hesitate to go there at once, to rouse him, and to relate everything that had occurred, even to our own excursion abroad together. I have been with him ever since, supposing the Princess Deehra to be safely here with you."

Zita was staring straight before her, biting her lips in evident effort to control herself, and now she sank backward upon a chair and buried her face for a moment in her hands.

But she did not weep. She appeared to be too greatly frightened for that. At last she murmured:

"What could have happened? What could have happened?"

"Wait here a moment," said the detective abruptly.

He remembered perfectly the method of entering the secret passage, and, although the entrance was from the bedchamber of the countess, he did not wait to ask permission to enter there, but dashed through the door and past it to the place in the wall where the spring was concealed.

He hurried through the passage to its extremity, using his electric torch as he went, and carefully examining every foot of the way, as far as the door through the wall into the street; but, it being broad day now, he did not deem it wise to open that.

There were still traces of snow in the cold passage, where they had tracked it in the night before, but he had no means of telling if all of what he saw were deposited there by the countess, on her return, or if part of it were the result of the return of the princess.

He found against the side of the passage, in one place, some hairs torn from the fur of the coat he had worn, and which the countess had provided for him.

That coat he had given up to the princess, when he brought her out into the cold from her place of imprisonment; but he could not tell if the fur had been scraped off while he was wearing the coat, or if the princess had deposited it there.

In returning, however, as he was reentering the bedchamber from the secret passage, he discovered other hairs from that same fur, just before he passed through the narrow doorway in the paneling.

They had caught upon a sliver, and in such a manner that it was at once plain to his experienced eye that they must have been detached from the coat in *entering* the bedchamber, and not upon *leaving* it.

He had not returned there, wearing that coat. The only person who could have done so was the princess herself; therefore she *had*—or, rather, the coat had—been in that room since he wore it from there.

He closed the entrance to the secret passage and returned to the salon of the suite.

"I beg your pardon, countess, for passing through your bedchamber without permission, but I wished to examine the passageway. The princess returned here last night, whether you saw her or not."

"She—returned—here?"

"Yes."

"Do you mean that she came and went away again without letting me know?"

"If you have no knowledge of the fact—yes."

She drew herself up haughtily, and exclaimed:

"Do you insinuate, Mr. Carter, that I tell an untruth when I tell you that I have not seen her, and that if she has been here, I have no knowledge of it?"

"No, countess. You did me the honor to doubt me a moment ago. I might do the same now with just as much reason. But the princess did return here. She was here—or, at least, the fur coat I gave her to wear was here. See!"

"Where did you find them?"

"At the entrance to the passageway."

"You might have left them there yourself when you went out."

"I happen to know that I did not, and, besides, they were caught in such a manner that it must have been done by a person coming this way. You must be a sound sleeper, countess."

"I am not. I am a very light sleeper. I do not believe that a person could have entered my room without waking me."

"You were very tired and cold when you returned here. It was almost two o'clock. You might have slept more soundly than usual."

"Even in that case nothing in the world could make me believe that Dechra would pass me without waking me. Do you mean, by all this, that you believe she came here deliberately, and went away again of her own accord?"

"That is the way it looks to me."

"I cannot believe it. She would not do it without telling me."

"And yet it seems that she has done so."

"But if she intended to go away again without disturbing me, why should she come here at all? No; I will not believe it."

"She was very lightly clad, for one thing—her feet, particularly. It was very cold outside this morning. She needed wraps and other clothing, as did also her companion. She could wear yours, I think. You are about of the same figure. Doubtless she needed money, too. More than likely she did."

The countess, during this speech, was staring straight ahead of her, wide-eyed and troubled.

"I do not believe she would do it," she murmured, more to herself than to her companions. "Nothing on earth could make me believe it. The very first thing she would have done on entering here would have been to rouse me. No, no, Mr. Carter. Your clues to the contrary, notwithstanding, you can never make me believe that her royal highness, the Princess Deehra, was in this room while I was sleeping. It is not true."

The prince all this time had been an attentive observer, and also a listener to all that was taking place. Now he interposed.

"Pardon me a moment, Mr. Carter," he said mildly, but in a tone that Nick had not heard him make use of before. "I would like to say a few words right here."

"Yes, sir," replied Nick.

"Zita," continued the prince, "you are deceiving us. I can see it in your eyes and hear it in your voice. You are not telling us the truth. Deehra was here, and you know it. She insisted upon going away again at once, because she was afraid to face his majesty. She bound you to silence, and you are endeavoring to carry out her wishes. You may confess the fact to us, however, without prejudice to her. Why don't you do so?"

Countess Zita took a step backward and lifted her chin defiantly; and she replied:

"Your royal highness forgets himself when he charges me with lying—with telling a deliberate falsehood."

"Zita! Countess! Do not you forget yourself? There is some excuse for you for defending the princess."

"I am not defending the princess now; I am defending myself. I do not believe that Deehra was here last night, and all the detectives and royal highnesses in the world cannot make me believe it. If she was here I do not know it, and I do not believe that she would come here without letting me know it. I do not believe she *could*, and, if she could, I am sure she would not have done so."

CHAPTER IV.

THE COUNTESS ZITA'S DEFENSE.

The Countess Zita presented a very pretty picture indeed as she stood there facing the prince with her head thrown back, her eyes flashing, while she in effect defied him. But it was evident to Nick all the time that she knew his kindly heart, and with whom she had to deal.

What might have been said next will never be known, for at that moment there came an interruption of the most astonishing sort.

The portières were brushed aside, and the king, closely followed by Count Herbert von Linmark, stepped into the room unannounced.

For a moment he stood still, just inside the curtains, surveying the group, and there was an unpleasant smile on his face; one which boded ill for somebody, Nick thought.

The king's glance swept from one to another, beginning with the countess, hesitating for an instant only upon the detective, and finally stopping when it encountered the calm eyes of his brother, Prince Rupert.

"What does your royal highness here, in the rooms of the Countess Zita, at this hour in the morning?" the king demanded, with cutting emphasis.

"Your majesty will observe that we were about to depart," replied the prince evasively, knowing only too well his brother's temper, and fearing to rouse it, although he, in reality, stood in no fear of it, or of him.

"That does not reply to my question, sir," said the king coldly.

"Very well, sir; we came upon the business of your majesty. I think that is all that need be said in the presence of the gentleman who accompanies your majesty."

For a moment he returned the king's stare as coldly as it was given; and then the king spoke again.

"Fortunately, your call here requires no explanation, as I already know about it, and its cause. Your royal highness may retire."

"But, your majesty——"

"Do I have to give your royal highness an order twice?"

The prince bowed. Then he stepped forward and raised the countess' hand to his lips, giving her a meaning glance of encouragement as he did so. Then, turning again, he said:

"Come, Mr. Carter. We will go."

"Mr. Carter will be good enough to remain," said the king icily. "I have business with the gentleman."

Nick shrugged his shoulders, cast a meaning glance at Prince Rupert, who thereupon passed quietly from the room.

Then, ignoring the detective completely, the king for the first time addressed the countess.

"How long has this gentleman been here, countess?"

he demanded bruskly, and indicating, by a gesture, the detective.

"Mr. Carter came but a few moments ago, with his royal highness, the prince," she replied.

"Have you forgotten how to address me, madam?"

"No, your majesty."

"How long a time is it now since you last parted with Mr. Carter, countess?" the king demanded suddenly.

"I do not remember, your majesty," she said coolly. Evidently she was perfectly mistress of herself, and was in every way equal to the occasion.

"Is it necessary that I should refresh your memory, madam?"

"That is for your majesty to decide," she replied again.

"This man here"—and he indicated Nick by a gesture—"has proven himself a serpent in the royal household."

"Well, sire?" She was perfectly cool, although all the color had left her face, and she appeared like a marble statue standing there before her accuser.

"Do you dare to answer me like that, madam? Who was here at your door last night?"

"If your majesty will pardon me!"

It was Nick Carter who spoke, not in a tone that was louder than the ordinary, but with a certain timbre to it that brought the king up standing, so to speak.

He wheeled about with an expression of wondering rage upon his face. Never before in all his life had any person dared to interrupt him when he was speaking. It were little less than treason to do so, and even Zita was startled by it.

It was perhaps the unprecedented aspect of the incident that gave Nick the advantage he sought, for the king was speechless long enough for Nick to continue with what he had to say.

"I could not, of course, avoid hearing what your majesty just said to the countess," he continued. "It seemed to me that the remark should have been addressed to me rather than to her, since I am the one who is charged with wrong-doing. I was about to say, if your majesty will pardon me still a moment, that His Royal Highness, Prince Rupert, will inform your majesty, if you will inquire of him, that I passed the night in his company."

"By Heaven, sir!" cried the king, now fairly beside himself. "Do you dare to defy me in my own palace? Do you dare to interrupt me when I am speaking?"

"I supposed your majesty would prefer to be corrected before committing an unpardonable error—unpardonable even in a king," said Nick mildly. "I can assure your majesty, on the honor of a gentleman, that no indiscretion whatever has been committed within the walls of your palace, with my knowledge."

"Be silent, sir! Speak when you are requested to do so!" He wheeled then upon the countess again, and cried out savagely:

"Answer me, madam!"

"I do not understand the purport of your majesty's question," replied the countess coolly. "Who was here when, sire? I do not understand."

"After midnight, last night. Who came here to these rooms? Answer me."

"No one came here, sire."

It was an untruth, of course, but under the circumstances a perfectly pardonable one. It was plain to Nick that Zita had resolved to pit her own word against the accusations of the count, who still held himself in the background, and who evidently did not at all appreciate the turn affairs were taking.

"No one came here?" cried the king, and he stared first at her, then half-turned and looked long into the face of the detective; then turned the other way, and fixed his eyes upon Count Herbert.

To do the king justice, he was always more impetuous than unkind, and at this particular time he had been suffering for several days with his old enemy, neuralgia, which made him anything but pleasant company.

But the flat denial, made with perfect coolness, of Zita's, coupled with the calm assurance of the detective of what the prince would say upon the subject, evidently had weight with the monarch; and now he turned upon the man who had brought this scene about.

"Count Herbert von Linmark," he said, with cold sternness, "repeat here, now, in the presence of the countess and this gentleman, the accusation you made to me as soon as I returned from my morning ride."

"Will your majesty pardon me again," said the detective quickly, but in his softest tones, "if I, as your guest—for I am your guest, sire—make one appeal to your majesty before the Count von Linmark is permitted to reply to that command? I do it, sir, in behalf of the lady, who it seems to me is placed in an unfortunate position in this matter. I appeal to your majesty's known sense of justice that this line of questioning be not continued in the presence of the countess. I make my appeal, your majesty, not as one who is not your subject,

but as one who *is* your guest. Whatever accusations Count von Linmark may have to make against me can best be met where the enunciation of them will not offend the ears of a lady. Or, if the inquiry must proceed—if such is your majesty's will—let me in that case make a further appeal that his royal highness, your majesty's brother, be recalled."

For some unexplained reason the king seemed suddenly to have recovered his equilibrium of mind. He seemed to appreciate all at once that he had conducted the investigation in rather a high-handed manner.

He swung himself on his heel and called out:

"Who waits without, there?"

"Captain Hensau, sir," replied that gentleman, stepping to the curtains and saluting. He was the young captain of the palace guard, and he had a face that the detective liked.

"Summon his royal highness, Prince Rupert, here at once," commanded the king.

"He waits outside, even now, sire," was the reply.

"Bid him enter, then."

It was evident that Prince Rupert had determined not to desert his friends, and had gone no farther than the door when ordered to leave the room by the king. Now he entered at once, and, saluting, waited for his brother to speak.

"Prince Rupert," said the king shortly, "can you tell me where Mr. Carter passed the night, last night?"

"I can, your majesty," was the reply.

"What!" cried the king.

"It was not in any place or in any line of conduct concerning which your majesty would not fully approve," said the prince calmly. "I can assure your majesty of that, with the added assurance that I have full knowledge of every move that Mr. Carter made last night, from the moment we dined together, late, until we had our coffee together again, shortly after four o'clock this morning. If your majesty wishes me to go into detail concerning all that we both did, I will, of course, do so, but it seems to me unnecessary."

"Do you assure me of this, Rupert?" demanded the king eagerly.

"I do, your majesty."

"You dined together last evening, and you had your coffee together again at four this morning?"

"On my honor as a prince, we did, sire." (And this was the absolute truth, too. In fact, the prince had cleverly avoided the necessity for telling a falsehood.)

The king glanced in perplexity from one to the other of the two, then for an instant upon Count Herbert, who opened his lips to speak, but who closed them again when the king turned toward Countess Zita.

"Have you any explanation to suggest for this remarkable circumstance, madam?" he asked. "I must confess that it is beyond me. I cannot understand it. Was there some one at your door last night, countess, even though that person did not enter?"

"I believe there may have been, your majesty," she replied, coolly and calmly. "The person who has made these wanton accusations against me and others has long persecuted me with his attentions. I have refrained from appealing to your majesty, because I did not wish to trouble you. But he stands there! His name is Count Herbert von Linmark, whom my maid Annette reports as having pursued her through the corridors last night when she was attending to some duties for me. If any man was at my door last night, he was assuredly the one, though why he should seek to discredit me in your majesty's sight I do not know."

CHAPTER IV.

EVERY INCH A KING.

In order to comprehend thoroughly the situation one should understand something of the usages of Court etiquette.

During the interview that had just taken place, Nick Carter had already transgressed it many times; but, then, he was in two senses of the word a privileged character. One of these was that he was an American, and therefore not a subject of the crowned head in whose presence he stood; the other was, as he had already stated, that he was a guest.

It is true that he had presumed upon these privileges—both of them; but he had done so only for the sake and in the interest of the lady in whose presence they were; he had done so, and had run the risk of affronting the king for her sake alone. To save her from the injustice that was so nearly visited upon her, and also from unmerited insult.

As we have observed, he succeeded in turning the tables nicely, and in doing so without the necessity of tell-

ing a falsehood, which he abhorred, even though the present instance was one where a falsehood would have done better justice to all concerned than the truth.

The prince had come the nearest to telling an untruth, and in reality he had done so by implication; but it was by implication only, for he had succeeded in giving the impression, without saying so, that Nick Carter had been with him throughout the night, and the king surmised from that that they had gone abroad together, and had not returned until four in the morning.

When Prince Rupert informed the king that he *knew* every act of the detective throughout the night, he told only the absolute truth, for the detective had told him of all of them.

However, we understand the situation, just as it was, without the necessity for further explanation.

But to refer again to the question of Court etiquette. It meant simply that, in the face of the accusation that the countess had just cast upon Count Herbert, the latter could not reply to her, even to deny it, until the king directed him to speak.

He was compelled to remain silent, with white face and rage-shrouded eyes, under the lash of her scorn and her accusing words, until the king should bid him reply.

An American, under like circumstances, would have instantly "spoken out in meeting," and have said what he had to say, no matter what the circumstances; but for Count Herbert to have done so would have been to condemn himself to even worse conditions than those already existing. Even the prince himself, under the circumstances, could not have spoken out without the permission of his elder brother, who was his king.

In the manner of the king himself, a remarkable change had taken place since he entered the room.

He had been violently angry when he entered it. The neuralgic pains with which he had suffered during the night had not ceased, and, being a man of uncertain temper always, these pains rendered him much more so.

Arriving at the palace after his morning ride, still suffering, and only to hear Count Herbert's vague insinuations, it is no wonder that he was angry.

And then, when he arrived at the rooms of Countess Zita and discovered Nick Carter already there, and accompanied by the prince, it was natural that he should suppose this to be a part of the plot to deceive him.

But the perfect assurance of the detective, his courteous yet firm replies to the king, his claims, rightly asserted as a foreigner and a guest, had all had their effect upon the king, and had recalled him to himself thoroughly. Besides, the pains had ceased, for everybody knows that neuralgia comes and goes without explanation, or apparent method.

There were two or three minutes of strained silence while the king thought deeply; then, addressing the countess again, he said:

"A few more questions, countess, which you will not hesitate to answer."

"Certainly not, your majesty," she replied, smiling brightly at him; and she could smile as brightly and as winningly as any woman ever born—she could bring sunshine into a room where it was not with that smile of hers, and she knew it."

"As I understand you, madam, you do not know positively that Count Herbert von Linmark was at your door at any time last night?"

"No, your majesty. I could not swear to such a thing."

"You do not, I suppose, know as a fact that any man was there, madam?"

"Save what has been told me here this morning, sire."

"Will you be good enough to tell me again, then, exactly why you made the extraordinary statement concerning the count that you just did?"

"Your majesty, I made it by implication. It seemed to me that my accuser was the count; that it was because of words uttered by him to you that you were incensed against me; that for the suffering I have been compelled to endure in this room within the last half-hour he was solely to blame, and, knowing the utter injustice of it all and the falsity of it all, it quite naturally occurred to me that Count Herbert, of Linmark, had wilfully and maliciously placed me in this false position. And he could have but one reason for doing so, and that is, as I have stated, merely because I have repulsed him and will not listen to his suit. Therefore, your majesty, I replied, naturally, that if any man hovered near my door last night, it was the count himself. I make the accusation only by implication, the suggestion for it having come from himself, as your majesty plainly sees."

The king looked into her clear eyes for a moment; then he stepped quickly forward, and, raising her hand in his own, touched his lips to the tips of her fingers and stepped back.

"Countess," he said, "your king begs your pardon for the wrong he almost did you."

"Oh, sir! Oh, your majesty!" exclaimed the countess impulsively. Tears started to her eyes through her smile, and she dropped upon one knee, seized the king's hand, and kissed it.

"Rise, countess," he said, and he patted her affectionately upon the hand while he assisted her to do so. "It was an unjust accusation, and you made a splendid defense in the face of great obstacles. The king has apologized, and"—he shot one quick glance toward Count Herbert—"the Graf von Linmark can do no less."

It was a thrilling instant.

It seemed, just for a breath of time, as if the count would refuse to make the amends, but fortunately for him he did not go to such lengths.

With a face the color of chalk, he bowed low to the king, and then in the same manner toward the countess.

"I crave the indulgence and the pardon of the Countess Zita von Strellwitz," he said, in a voice that was so choked with rage as to be scarcely audible, and even the rage in it seemed more like some other emotion; and Zita returned his curtsy with a cold smile.

"Gentlemen, we will retire," said the king. "Countess, we trust that you will feel none the worse for this morning's encounter."

He turned then and strode from the room, followed by the prince and then by the detective, the count bringing up the rear.

But as he swung around, he cast one malevolent look upon Zita which made her shudder in spite of herself. She fancied that behind it she could detect a lurking smile of triumph, as well as a threat, and she watched his back as he left the room, as if from its expression she might read something of the meaning of that look of his. Then she rang sharply for Annette.

In the corridor outside the door the king paused for an instant.

"Mr. Carter," he said, "you will walk beside me to my cabinet, if you please. Gentlemen, I will ask you also to accompany me there. We have yet some mysteries about the doings of the night to dispose of."

Rupert motioned to Captain Hensau to walk beside him, and so, with Count Herbert bringing up the rear alone, they passed along the corridors, and Nick knew that whatever whispers there might have been as the result of the evil tongue of the count, this last act of the king's would forever still them.

"I made no apology to you, Mr. Carter," began the king; but again Nick Carter interrupted him.

"Pray do not, your majesty," he said. "It is entirely unnecessary. Your majesty observes that I am transgressing again in interrupting your speech, but I could not permit you to continue in that strain. I am not used to court etiquette, sir, and am accustomed to speaking out my mind always."

"And quite freely, too," laughed the king; "particularly when it is in defense of a woman. But I honor you for it, Mr. Carter. But, seriously, I am at a loss to conceive what possible reason Count Herbert could have had to so malign the countess and you—unless—unless he was really jealous of you. You were coquetting with the countess yesterday—I should have said that she was coquetting with you. Possibly that fact may explain it all, although it does not in any sense excuse it. But Countess Zita coquets with everybody—even with me. You saw her do it just now, when that smile of hers brought sunshine into the room. No?"

"Yes, your majesty. It is as natural to her as it is for a bird to twitter when it alights upon a branch—and quite as harmless."

"I believe you, Carter. I do upon my soul. But what shall I do with Count Herbert? He must be punished."

"Does your majesty honor me by asking me that question, or——"

"Yes; yes. Give me your opinion as to him."

"Has not the count some estates somewhere in the country, your majesty?"

"Yes. In the mountains of Cretonia, one of my dependencies. It is a good idea. I will send him there for a time to rest and to think it over. But first I must question him."

They entered the cabinet a moment later, and, as soon as others who waited there were dismissed and the door was closed, the king, addressing the count, said:

"Graf von Linmark, will you now be good enough to explain to me and to these gentlemen the extraordinary story you related to me this morning, when I returned from my ride?"

He was the king, every inch of him, then, and not the petulant man who had first appeared in the rooms of the countess, and Nick Carter marveled at the change wrought in him when he was without pain.

"I related to your majesty only what I supposed to be the truth," relied the count coldly. "It seems that I have erred; it seems that my eyes and my other senses deceived me, and that what I believed I saw I could not have seen. I crave your majesty's indulgence and pardon."

"Is it true that you have persecuted the countess with your attentions, knowing them to be unwelcome?" asked the king, still speaking mildly.

"It is true, sire, that I have devoted considerable attention to the countess, but it is also true that I was not aware until now that she regarded them as a persecution."

"There can be no mistake in your mind concerning that point now."

"No, sire."

"You have an estate in Cretonia, Count Herbert."

"Yes, your majesty."

"It has occurred to me that it perhaps needs your attention; that some personal supervision of it would benefit yourself as well as the estate. We will expect you back again, in Breslin, at the end of a month, Count Herbert, and we trust that by that time we will all have forgotten this unpleasant scene. Good morning, Graf von Linmark, and a pleasant sojourn to you."

The count bowed low, first to the king then to the prince, and then to Nick Carter; but, as he performed the last act of courtesy, he looked for one instant into the detective's eyes, and Nick saw there a smile of such triumphant malice that it set him to wondering, even then.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BANISHED COUNT.

"Captain Hensau," said the king, as soon as the count had gone, "it is my desire that Mr. Carter have the freedom of the palace. You will see that my wish is carried out."

"Yes, your majesty."

"Mr. Carter, I do not think that I will ask you now the questions that are uppermost in my mind concerning your duties while here. I will defer that until later in the day, when I have more time at my disposal. I see that many are waiting for an audience with me, and so I will turn you over to the care of my brother Rupert. Later in the day, however, I may wish to talk with you. I will send for you."

It was the detective's dismissal as well as Prince Rupert's, and they withdrew at once, giving place to many others who were waiting.

As soon as they passed into the main corridor of the palace, Nick exclaimed, under his breath:

"Rupert, I would give a good deal if I had one of my assistants here right now."

"Indeed, why?" asked the prince.

"I would send him on the track of that scoundrelly count—for he is a scoundrel, as you know."

"To be sure. But why send any one on his track, since we already know so well where he is going?"

"If we were only assured that we do know, prince."

"Know? Why, it is as certain as fate itself. The dismissal of the king was nothing more or less than an order couched in the language of the court, that he had no choice but to go to his estates in Cretonia, or to prison. He is banished for thirty days—I am only surprised that the king made it so short."

"All the same, Rupert, I don't believe he has any intention of going there, unless ——".

"My dear Nicholas, he would not dare go elsewhere. There is no place in the world secure enough to hold him if he disobeyed the king. He will go there, and without delay. Be assured of that. But you added another word to your fears. You said, 'unless——' What did you mean by that?"

"This: Unless he had already made up his mind to go to Cretonia, even before the king banished him, and the banishment was, after all, merely an aid to his plots and plans."

"Humph! How could it be that?"

"That is what I am now endeavoring to determine. What do you know of his place there?"

"How do you mean? What do I know of it?"

"Have you ever visited it?"

"Yes. Twice. It is one of the finest estates in the kingdom. Linmark castle, situated in Cretonia, is one of those grand old piles of masonry which have stood since history began. It has always been considered impregnable, and would be now, save by the use of siege-guns. The Linmarks have always been a powerful family, and they consider themselves almost on a par with royalty in this country."

"The count is a rich man?"

"One of the richest in the kingdom, so far as lands and influence can extend. There are bankers who have more, perhaps."

"He has many followers—retainers, who are devoted to him and his interests?"

"Thousands. The city of Cozovanna is on his estate. He owns every building in it. There are many villages."

"He could almost defy the king himself, once he is there, at his own castle, then?"

"For a time—yes. Once he almost did so. But he has repented of that since."

"When was that?"

"Some years ago. He asked for the hand of Deehra—that was when our father was alive."

"When do you suppose the count will start for Cretonia?"

"He has twenty-four hours in which to make ready to begin his banishment. That is understood. He may wait until the expiration of that time, or he may start at once."

They strode on in silence until they were in the apartments of the prince, and then the detective, after lighting a cigar, said:

"Rupert, I have changed my mind about one thing."

"What is that?"

"I now think that Count Herbert *does* intend to go to Cretonia."

"Of course he intends to go there. He would not dare do otherwise, notwithstanding his great power. He would be nothing, here or elsewhere, if he lost his power at court now."

"I have changed my mind to even a greater extent than you imagine."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that now I have determined that Count Herbert must be prevented from going there. He must not be permitted to go there."

"Good Heaven, Nicholas, what do you mean? Would you fly in the face of the kings order?"

"Yes; if the cause were sufficient."

"I cannot pretend to understand you."

"Answer me a few more questions before I explain."

"Certainly."

"If he should start for Cretonia at once—is the place easily accessible, and are there easy methods of arriving there?"

"No. It is about the most inaccessible place you could imagine, and he could not possibly start before late this afternoon; that is, by train. There is none until then."

"What time this afternoon does the train that would take him there start?"

"At four, I think. It is the train to Cozovanna."

"And what time should it arrive at Cozovanna?"

"Say at midnight. Near that time."

"Is it, then, a considerable journey from Cozovanna to the castle?"

"It is six hours of steady riding along mountain roads that are in some places almost impassable—at some seasons of the year they are quite so. It is up, up, up all the time, and down and up and up and down."

"The train occupies eight hours on the trip to Cozovanna; what is the distance in English miles?"

"Say a hundred and fifty. The train goes very slowly. It is a narrow-gage, winding road, kept in not too good repair. It has never paid."

"The count might determine to travel with horses."

"He might, and he is quite likely to do so. He keeps many horses here, and he would not care to leave them behind if he is to be absent a month. And another thing."

"Well?"

"Now that you have called my attention to the fact, since he is going directly to the castle, he could arrive there quite as quickly from Breslin by using horses as he could by traveling by train to Cozovanna, and using horses from there. And more comfortably, too."

"It is a shorter route, then; eh?"

"Much shorter, although the last part of the journey is much more difficult."

"The difficulties of it would not deter him?"

"No; and, besides, he has his own horses here, and others all along the route. He could obtain relays every twenty miles."

"Then it is safe to assume that he will select that route."

"I think it is."

"Another question: If he should depart at once, with horses, and we should——"

"*We?*"

"——and I should take the train at four this afternoon, would it be possible for me to head him off anywhere on his route, before he could arrive at the castle?"

"Ummm! It might be done. It might. But the

count drives like the devil when he travels in that manner. But what in the world are you getting at?"

"I will tell you presently. Could you summon Captain Hensau here for a moment?"

"Yes. He is not now in attendance upon the king—in person, I mean."

"Is Hensau to be trusted?"

"As thoroughly as any man I know."

"Is he devoted to you?"

"Entirely."

"And is not *too* fond of Count Herbert?"

"Quite the opposite, believe me."

"Will you summon him here, please?"

It was done at once, and in a very few moments the handsome young captain stood bowing before them.

"Mr. Carter wishes some conversation with you," said the prince, and turned away.

"Captain Hensau," said the detective, "I believe that I read you correctly when I assume that you can perform a duty, and not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Is that correct?"

"Theoretically it is, sir," was the reply.

"You are more or less familiar with the details of all that has occurred this morning in regard to Count Herbert von Linmark. You were present in the king's cabinet when he was banished to his estates in Cretonia."

"I was, sir."

"Do you happen to know where the count is at the present moment?"

"He was in his rooms in the palace less than half an hour ago. I assume that he is there yet."

"Captain, it is necessary that I should know every move that the count makes from now until the time of his departure from the city. It is necessary that I should know what time it is his intention to depart, and know it as much ahead of time as possible. It is necessary that I should know what route he intends to take, who will accompany him, and, in fact, everything concerning that proposed journey. Do you think that you could obtain that information for me without making him aware that he is spied upon?"

"I do, sir."

"You have a man who could be trusted to perform the service?"

"Several of them."

"And who are capable?"

"Quite so, sir."

"Will you undertake to do what I have asked?"

"Yes, sir."

"And get the information to me as soon as it may be done?"

"I will, sir."

"And, captain, if you have other men of the same character to spare, who will not be needed directly upon the duties I have just given you, will you also find out for me if it is not true that a carriage of some kind has already started for Castle Linmark? In fact, that it started some time early this morning—possibly before daylight?"

"If it can be done, sir."

"It must be done."

"It shall be done."

"Good. That is the way to talk. Bring your report to me here, captain, and, pray, lose no time."

CHAPTER VII.

THE WAY THE THING HAPPENED.

"Now, Nicholas," said the prince as soon as they were again alone, "perhaps you will be good enough to tell me what it is all about? Why do the movements of Count Herbert interest you since his banishment, and what do you mean by suggesting that we head him off before he can arrive at his castle? Why does the moment of his departure interest you, and——"

The detective held up one hand laughingly.

"Rupert," he said, "you are asking all your questions at once. I will try to answer them, only I would like to keep busy while doing so, instead of sitting here idle and talking. You have no objections to that?"

"No; not if there is anything to be busy about."

"There is a great deal to keep us busy just now, Rupert," replied the detective seriously, "if we would save the Princess Deehra from worse than death."

Prince Rupert started to his feet.

"I see!" he cried out. "Count Herbert! You believe that he has her again in his power, and that he is taking her to Cretonia with him."

"I believe that he has her again in his power—yes, but I believe that she has already started for Castle Linmark."

"Explain yourself."

"I believe that in some inexplicable manner that we

cannot now understand, the princess fell again into the power of Linmark last night, after I left her at the door through the wall. I have tried my best to figure it out, but I cannot do so satisfactorily to myself, save in one way."

"And what is that?"

"It is that Zita is mistaken in her supposition that the princess would not pass through her room without waking her."

"You believe thoroughly in Zita, then?"

"Absolutely. She told us the truth, notwithstanding your charges to the contrary."

"Oh, dear! I had made up my mind that Deehra was at least safe to-day, although she had run off again; and now you upset me entirely."

"Princess Deehra would not have run away to-day again without leaving some assurance for me, after what I did for her last night. I don't think she is that sort."

"No. You are right."

"She as much as promised me that she would see me to-day, and I don't think she is one to go back on even an implied promise."

"You are correct. She is not."

"Very well, then. Unless she was stopped on her way through the secret passage from the street to the palace, she must have reached and have passed through Zita's rooms."

"True."

"Now, I reason that she could not have been stopped in that passage, for its existence is not known save to ourselves. If Count Herbert—who is the only person in all the world who would have dared to stop her—if he had known of that secret passage, don't you think that he would have made use of that knowledge long before now?"

"Most certainly I do."

"I am sure that nobody was spying upon us when I let the two ladies in at the door in the wall, and, hence, he could not have followed them after I got out of sight. And furthermore, before I was out of sight—long before that—they were both inside Zita's rooms."

"Well. Go on. I confess that I do not quite follow you."

"Have you forgotten what I told you about dropping the count out of the window into the park?"

"I'll never forget that. I wish I could have seen it."

"He was the most surprised man on top of earth, I suppose, to think that I was strong enough to do it; and the angriest. He lost no time, you may be sure, in getting himself back to that corridor, near the countess' rooms, in search of me."

"Likely not."

"He didn't find me."

"No."

"And consequently his instant supposition was that I had passed inside the countess' rooms."

"Well, in that he was correct."

"Let us put ourselves in his place for a moment, prince. He got back there, we will say, and, finding no trace of me instantly, concluded that, thinking I had effectually disposed of him, I was daring enough—as I was—to go about the consummation of my plans."

"Yes, I know."

"If he had any doubts in his mind, he went at once to my room to find out if I had returned there. Discovering that I had not, he made up his mind that nothing on earth should prevent his catching me. Understand?"

"Yes."

"Well, I wasn't in my own room; and so he returned there to watch outside the countess' door."

"Well, well, well?"

"Probably he was not alone in that vigil. I have already seen enough to satisfy me that there are at least three or four men about the palace who are devoted to his interests."

"In that you are entirely correct."

"Now, let us leave him and one or more of his followers there on guard in the corridor, and return to the princess and the countess."

"Yes."

"First, remember that almost at once after I entered her rooms last night, we passed on out of them again upon the street. She provided me with a fur coat and a hat for my disguise, but more for the purpose of keeping me warm, for, naturally, I went to her rooms without street apparel. I had no idea why she had asked me to go there, save that it was in the interest of the princess."

"I understand."

"We went out together. We were in the bitter cold of the night air more than two hours, and during that time we walked a considerable distance. The snow was hard and slippery, and the walking none too easy."

"Aren't you wandering from the subject?"

"Not at all. I am only convincing you that by the time we returned to the palace the countess was very tired, indeed—very greatly fatigued, and she was also very cold. Do you understand that?"

"Yes."

"I did not go in with her. I left her as I did the princess later, at the door in the wall."

"Yes."

"Now, when she returned to her rooms, you can be assured that she lost no time in getting herself into bed. Doubtless Annette, her maid, gave her some warm drink, and I'll wager that it was not ten minutes after she was in bed before she was sleeping so soundly that you could not have awakened her with Gabriel's horn."

"Ho, ho. I begin to understand you now."

"Now we will go back to Princess Deehra. I gave her the fur coat I was wearing, to keep her from freezing, and I hurried her through the streets, after rescuing her, as fast as she could go. I also left her at the door in the street wall."

"Yes. I remember."

"I had told her about the previous expedition of Zita and myself into the night, and she knew what the countess had already done. Therefore, when she entered Zita's bedchamber from the secret passage, and saw how soundly she was sleeping, it is my opinion that she determined not to disturb her—at least, not at once. She may even have attempted to rouse Zita, and have failed at the first attempt, and then remembering what the countess had already done that night, thought it unjust to disturb her."

"That would be like Deehra."

"I can imagine her saying to her English companion that they would permit her to sleep; and adding that they would go at once to her own apartments."

"But all the doors to the princess' apartments are securely locked."

"Aye; but have you forgotten that these two, the princess and Zita, were often together at night? Have you forgotten that a key to one of the doors of the princess' suite hangs on the wall in Zita's room?"

"No, no. To be sure."

"Your niece had only to secure that key, and she knew where it should hang, and to pass out of Zita's apartment to the coridor, and thence to her own suite. Perhaps she thought of returning later to Zita's rooms. Who can tell?"

"Well?"

"Prince, outside that door, Count Herbert and one or more with him were on the watch for me. The count himself was, doubtless, close at hand!"

"By Heaven, Nicholas, I see it all now!"

"Of course you do. Deehra's own suite is across the corridor, and a little farther along than where Zita's are situated. Probably she came out suddenly and had crossed the corridor, to her own door, having it unlocked before Linmark recovered from his astonishment. Instead of seeing me, he saw before him the Princess Deehra, whom he supposed to be safely a prisoner in the house where he had confined her until he could transport her to his castle in Cretonia. He knew that her return to the palace *now* meant his utter and complete ruin. He sprang after her, forced his way into her own rooms behind her, and—well, I haven't got any farther than that, save that he succeeded somehow in getting her and her companion out of the palace and in starting them on the road for Castle Linmark. Now, where can you procure a key that will open one of the doors of the princess' suite?"

"I know. Wait here a moment."

Five minutes later they were on their way together to Deehra's suite, but Nick thought it wise to tap at the door of Zita's rooms before entering them. He wished her to bear them company.

As soon as Annette informed her who was there, she came to the door, running, almost, meeting them just inside.

"Ah, Mr. Carter!" she exclaimed. "How can I ever thank you? And you, your royal highness, for what you have done for me?"

"Never mind the thanks, countess," said the detective briskly. "We have other things on our mind just now. Oblige me by looking on the hook where should hang the key to the princess' suite. I do not think you will find it there."

"No," she cried out an instant later. "It is gone."

"I thought so. Will you come with us, countess? The prince and I wish to enter Deehra's rooms. We wish you to go with us. You see, she was here, after all, last night. She did pass by you without waking you, but that was because you were sleeping so soundly that she did not wish to disturb you. Count Herbert was watching outside for me, and, in passing out of this chamber, she walked directly into his power again. Don't you see that, Zita?"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WAY TO THE MOUNTAINS.

They entered Princess Deehra's rooms silently and with reverence, but almost instantly it was apparent that the detective was correct in his estimate of the circumstances, for the door they opened was the same as the one to which the key that had formerly hung in Zita's room would have admitted them.

But there was sufficient evidence that there had been a struggle there, and a severe one while it lasted. Nick recalled with a grim smile that the Englishwoman was a lusty person, and one who would not submit tamely to recapture by her former jailers.

In proof of this and of all that Nick Carter had conjectured, a charm which Count Herbert had long been in the habit of wearing on his watch-chain was lying upon the floor, where it had fallen in the struggle.

A chair had been overturned; a strip of cloth from the skirt the princess had been wearing was also upon the floor, where it had evidently been torn away by catching in the spur worn at the boot-heel of Count Herbert's assistant in this terrible attack.

They passed through from room to room, and saw where many things had happened.

The bed in a room usually assigned to one of the maids had been torn apart, and a sheet and a pillow-case were missing from it. Evidently these had been used for the purposes of binding and gagging the princess and her companion.

The wardrobe of the princess had been opened, and fur coats and wraps were scattered about the place, showing that the men had made what effort they could to secure suitable wraps for the two ladies.

They were strangely silent, these three, while they were making this investigation; it seemed so like a sacrilege, the thing that had happened.

But presently they turned away, and passed through into the room by which they had entered the suite; and they were on the point of passing out, when the detective heard a sound from another room—the sound of a closing door.

"Wait," he whispered. "Some person has just entered one of the other rooms by a different door. Wait here till I see who it is."

He glided forward, and, through a crack between the door and the casing, saw a woman, one of the chamber-maids of the palace, crossing the adjoining room—and, strangely enough, she went directly to the room where the bed had been despoiled of a sheet and a pillow-case.

Then she passed on into the wardrobe chamber, and instantly began picking up and arranging the things that were there. It was evident to Nick at once that she had been sent there to attend to these things, to destroy all traces of the recent visitation—and doubtless she had been well paid for it.

Nick watched her for a moment; then he stepped softly forward and touched her on the shoulder.

She uttered a scream of terror, and dropped the things she was holding, while she staggered back against a dressing-case, and stood there, panting.

Well she might, with the detective regarding her sternly, and with the prince and the countess side by side in the doorway observing the scene.

"Who sent you here?" asked the detective coldly.

The woman was silent. She was also sullen, and the detective did not believe he could get much out of her; but the prince interposed.

"It is not necessary that the woman should reply to your questions, Mr. Carter," he said. "It happens that I recognize her. She is from Cretonia; from a little village near the castle itself, in fact. That answers all the questions you would ask."

"Yes. I think it does."

"It is plain enough that Count Herbert sent her to these rooms to put things to rights, so that nothing of the struggle that took place here last night would be discovered."

"It is quite plain, your highness. It is also plain that she must be kept from communicating with others until the remainder of our work is done. Will your highness stand guard over her while I find Captain Hensau? He should know what to do with her."

"Yes. The countess and I will remain here on guard. The woman will scarcely attempt violence against either of us, I think."

Fortunately the detective met the captain in the corridor before he reached his office, for the captain of the palace guards was already on his way to make his first report in the matter that had been assigned to him.

In as few words as possible the detective related all that had occurred, and the captain called to one of his men to follow them. Then they returned to the suite of the princess.

He gave strict orders that the woman must be placed

in solitary confinement, and not permitted to speak to any person whatever until permission was given; and so she was led away by a back staircase, to the lower depths of the castle, after some further whispered instructions concerning her to her guard from the young captain.

"Now, Countess Zita," said the detective, "if you will permit the use of your rooms for a moment, the captain has a report to make to me; and as we are all in the conspiracy together you may as well hear it."

"Come," she replied; and led the way at once across the corridor to her own rooms.

"Well, captain?" asked Nick, as soon as they were ready to hear the report.

"Count Herbert has sent riders out ahead already to have his relays in readiness for a swift trip to the mountains," replied the captain. He owns a closed double sleigh that is fitted with the conveniences of a Pullman, and he has ordered that to be in readiness for him at five o'clock this afternoon. It is usually drawn by three horses; to-day it will be supplied with six."

"He intends to travel in style, anyhow," smiled the detective. "Are you sure there is no mistake in the hour of starting?"

"I am not sure; but if there should have been one, it will be rectified long enough before he starts for me to inform you, sir."

"Very good. Now about the other matter?"

"I have not myself received a report upon that as yet, sir, which means that thus far nothing has been discovered."

"Well, you keep your men on the alert, every minute of the time, and keep me informed by making a report whenever there is anything to tell?"

"Yes, sir."

"Does the train leave for Cozovanna precisely at four?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you familiar with the route between here and the Castle Linmark by highway?"

"Perfectly."

"Are you also familiar with the route between Cozovanna and Castle Linmark?"

"As certainly as I am with the corridors of the palace, sir."

"Do you think, if we should take the train to Cozovanna at four, it would be possible to intercept, at any place, a conveyance that left here this morning at daylight by highway, even if that conveyance were provided with relays?"

"In the summer-time it would be an easy matter, sir; now, I could not say. I do not know the condition of the roads in that neighborhood. I have not heard. But they are likely to be bad, and in that case——"

"Well, in that case?"

"I would rather take my chances of getting to the castle from here first, than by rail to Cozovanna, and thence by road."

"Then there is not much chance that we could overtake the count, even, after he is once started, even though we go to Cozovanna?"

"I am afraid not, sir."

"But he must be intercepted, if the other vehicle cannot be. Use your wits, Hensau. You know the country and the men along the route. Have you nothing to suggest?"

"The men along the route belong body and soul to Count Herbert, of Linmark."

"Humph!" said the detective, and he looked at his watch. "We have worked rapidly to-day," he said, with a smile. "It is scarcely noon yet. Captain Hensau, do you think you could secure two or three days' leave of absence from his majesty without informing him your reasons for making the request?"

"No, sir; but his royal highness could easily do it for me—or, rather, for you, sir."

"Is that so, prince? Could it be done?"

"I think so. I often ask leave for Karl when I wish to make particular use of him."

"Captain Hensau, how is the king occupied at the present moment?"

"The minister of marine is with him now, sir. There are several others in waiting. I do not think he will be at liberty for two or three hours more. It is a busy day with his majesty, sir."

"It seems to be a busy day with me, too. One more question, and this one to you, your highness, and then I will know how to act. Do you think that the king would be willing to interrupt his regular business long enough to see me for a moment, if I should make the request at once?"

"I have not a doubt of it since the occurrences of this morning, Mr. Carter," smiled the prince.

"That settles it, then. Captain Hensau, conduct me to his majesty, and when we are there, get word to him that I wish very much to interrupt him, and to see him alone for exactly five minutes. Can you do that?"

"Yes, sir."

"What are you going to do, Nicholas?" asked the prince.

"I have an idea, your highness. I think I will pursue it. If you will consent to await me here, with the countess, I will return here as soon as it is performed."

"If the countess will permit," replied the prince.

"Good! I'll be back in a few moments. Lead the way, captain. I will talk further to you as we pass along the corridors."

As soon as they were outside and walking rapidly toward the front of the palace, he continued:

"Captain, all depends upon whether I can secure the consent of the king to what I wish to do. I shall question you now on the basis that that consent is already secured."

"Yes, sir."

"If we should leave here at two o'clock, we would have three hours' start of the count. Is there a road which starts away, apparently, in another direction, but from which we can turn and so intercept the count anywhere, having, as we will, that three hours' start of him?"

"Yes, sir. There is. A good road, too."

"How many men, all told, is the count likely to have in his escort?"

"With postilions, outriders, servants, and all, there should be ten or a dozen, sir; and it is likely there will be a guard besides that; perhaps a score of men all told, not counting the graf."

"All right. Now, without depleting your palace guard so that it will be noticeable, can you secure as many men as that to go with us? Men who can be trusted to fight for their princess? And men who will win if they do have to fight? Can you do that within the next two hours?"

"I can accomplish it in half an hour, sir."

"You are a man after my own heart, captain. As soon as you have secured my audience with the king, go about it and see that it is done, just as if permission were already granted; and, in the meantime, find out if there are any further reports. May I depend upon you?"

"You may, sir."

"Good again."

CHAPTER IX.

A MARSHAL OF THE KINGDOM.

"Your majesty," said the detective as soon as the king received him, which he did at once as soon as he was made aware of Nick Carter's desire, "I fear that I am transgressing every precedent of court usage during my sojourn in the palace. May I hope that for two reasons your majesty will pardon me? One of them is my own unfamiliarity with court life, and the other and more important one is my entire sincerity in the work I have to do."

"I think you may consider yourself pardoned, Mr. Carter," replied the king, smiling. "And now what is it that we can do for you?"

"I have come, sire, to crave permission to take with me, on a certain expedition I have in mind, Captain Hensau, of the Palace Guard, and a few men whom he will select; also to ask that his royal highness, Prince Rupert, may accompany us, and also that I may be given a roving commission, so to speak, for a few days, under your majesty's direct authority, with the privilege of reporting to your majesty at the first moment when I have anything definite to report, and not until then."

"Bless me!" exclaimed the monarch, laughing. "Isn't that rather a complicated request?"

"I endeavored to make it as plain as possible, sir."

"I will give you the permission you seek, Mr. Carter, readily enough, for I know that you would not make the request you have without good reason. But I would like to know something about the reasons for it, nevertheless."

"I would prefer, if your majesty will permit, to tell you as little as possible about the matter at the present moment. I have two reasons for that. One is that I do not wish to raise false hopes until I know that I am correct in my surmises; the other is that I do not wish to cause undue anxiety."

"You are referring to my daughter, the princess?"

"Yes, your majesty."

"You believe that you have information concerning her?"

"Yes."

"You hope at the end of the time you will be away to return her to the palace, unharmed, and none the worse for her experiences?"

"Yes, your majesty."

"Is Prince Rupert familiar with all this?"

"He is, sir."

"Does he approve of your present course, in not taking me entirely into your confidence, Mr. Carter?"

"I have not talked with him concerning that point, sir; but I think he would approve."

"Will you assure me that Princess Deehra is in no present danger?"

"If I am permitted to leave the palace, as I have requested, within the next hour or so, I think I can so assure your majesty. But if I and the others are detained, I could not give you the assurance, sir."

"Am I to understand that my daughter is detained somewhere by force?" asked the king, frowning.

"I can assure your majesty that she will be so detained within the next twenty-four hours if I am not permitted to go at once to her rescue."

"Mr. Carter, you must be frank with me. I must insist upon it."

"I would gladly be so, sir, were I positive concerning my own premises."

"You do not wish to tell me all that you suspect, then?"

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

"You asked for frankness, sir; I will give it to you. Because I fear lest your majesty would be precipitate, and so spoil all. There are some things that are better accomplished with a delicate touch than with the strong arm. I know that, ten hours ago, Princess Deehra was perfectly safe and unharmed. I fear that she will not be perfectly safe in ten hours from now unless I am permitted to depart at once."

"Who threatens her? Who dares to threaten my daughter?"

"Ah, sir, if I could answer that question frankly and back my reply with proofs, do you suppose I would hesitate?"

The king drummed upon the table with his fingers. Then he said:

"I have always supposed that she literally ran away from me. I have always supposed that she was in hiding somewhere near, and therefore I have not permitted myself to worry about her overmuch."

"So she did, and so she was—in the beginning. But I have reason to fear that conditions have changed for the princess."

"Why? How so?"

"There are always those who will take advantage of an opportunity such as the flight of the princess from the palace afforded, sir."

"I see that you are determined not to take me into your confidence."

"I am hoping that your majesty will not force me to say more at the present moment than my own judgment tells me I should say."

"Swear to me on your honor, Mr. Carter, that you believe her to be at this moment in no actual danger."

"I do so swear, sir."

"And you believe if I let you and the others go, as you have requested, you can rescue her, do you?"

"I do."

"And you are not concealing anything from me which would cause me actual suffering at the present moment—concealing it because of a mistaken idea of saving me pain?"

"No, sir. I swear to that, your majesty."

"Very well. I will trust you, Mr. Carter. You have my permission to do as you have requested."

"I thank you, sir."

"You asked for a roving commission. I will give you one that will be all-powerful. I will appoint you a special marshal of the kingdom. Captain Hensau shall bring you the commission within half an hour. Under it you will be answerable only to me, in person, and your authority will be temporarily greater than that of the prince, my brother. Will that satisfy you?"

"It is more than I asked for, your majesty; but it will not be amiss. I should like to have full and powerful authority in your name. It will enable me to work with better results all along the line."

"Here, Mr. Carter; wear this. All who observe it will recognize it as the king's own, and none will dare to ignore it."

From the left breast of his own coat the king detached the famous Order of the Golden Eagle, and himself fastened it to Nick Carter's coat. Then he stepped to a small cabinet, and took therefrom a red sash, which he handed to the detective.

"The prince will show you how it should be worn," he said. "With those two emblems of authority upon your person, there is no one in the kingdom who will question your authority to represent me. And now, after the fashion of your own country, there is my hand. Good-by, and may God expedite you upon your journey."

"Amen, your majesty. I thank you;" and the detective gave the king's hand such a hearty pressure with his own that the monarch winced.

"How strong you are," he murmured ruefully, but smiling.

"Aye, sir; and stronger now than ever, in your majesty's service."

"Carter, I wish I had a thousand men like you."

"And the world, sir, should regret that it has not other kings like your majesty."

"Oho! You would have made a courtier, if you had had half a chance."

"A poor one, sir, since I know only the truth. Courtiers deal in untruths."

"Go, then, and God speed you. Send Hensau to me at once. I will give him the required permission, and also your commission."

"And your brother, the prince?"

"It will not be necessary that he come to me. You may act as my delegate to Rupert."

A moment later the detective found himself in the corridor, having passed out through the private door in order to avoid meeting the gentlemen who were waiting to see the king. He did not care to have any of them see just yet the Order of the Eagle that blazed upon his breast. He did not care to have information concerning it get to Count Herbert before the departure of that gentleman for Cretonia.

He hurried directly to the apartments of Countess Zita, where the prince was awaiting him, and where he also found Captain Hensau—and the two gentleman and the lady stared in amazement when they saw the jeweled eagle gleaming upon the detective's coat.

Hensau drew himself up stiffly, clicked his heels together, and saluted instantly; the countess curtsied, and even the prince raised his right hand in a gesture of salute, while he murmured, with a half-smile:

"I salute you, Marshal Carter, as the personal representative of the king."

"Oh, pshaw!" replied Nick, smiling. "That is for others than ourselves—the count, for example—when it comes to a show-down. Here is the sash which you are to show me how to wear when the time comes to put it on. Hensau, the king demands your attendance upon him at once. From his presence return here, if you please."

Captain Hensau saluted again, and was gone without a word, evidently greatly impressed by the power which Nick Carter now held.

"You will go with me on this expedition, Rupert?" asked Nick, as soon as they were alone with the countess.

"If I may."

"The king has given his permission. He told me to tell you so."

"Then I will go, of course."

"And I?" asked the countess.

"You, countess?" laughed Nick. "I hardly think it is an expedition in which women can assist. You were not serious?"

"I was never more serious in my life. You are going to rescue Deehra, are you not?"

"Yes; certainly."

"She will need me. Moreover, she will need some articles that I should take to her. You must take me with you."

"But there will be twenty men of us, all told. If you should ride away among us——"

"Ah, but I will ride as a man; not as a woman."

"I do not understand."

"I will make you understand if only you will grant me permission to go. I can dress in the uniform of a young officer of the guards. A cloak will hide me sufficiently until we are free from the city. I shall take Annette, also disguised as I will be, and she will carry with her articles that the princess will require. Think a moment. You must bring her back with you; will it not be better to have me there to care for her, and Annette to wait upon her?"

"Almost you persuade me, countess; and yet there is likely to be a fight, and some danger."

"I am the daughter of generations of soldiers, and I can handle a light sword or use a pistol with the best of them. I may go with you—Marshal?"

"Let the prince decide for us," laughed the detective.

"The prince declines the honor," was the smiling rejoinder.

"Then I will decide for myself," said Zita, and she disappeared into an adjoining chamber.

CHAPTER X.

OFF TO THE RESCUE.

Captain Hensau returned before Zita reappeared, and he carried a roll of parchment in his hand, which he lost no time in presenting to the detective.

"The king's commission as his majesty's special representative, sir," he said, with pride; and saluted again.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the prince. "I don't know how you did it, Nicholas. I have never known my brother to do such a thing before."

"I have learned that he does not do things by halves, when he does them," replied Nick.

"You are right there."

Nick turned to the young captain.

"What have you accomplished in the way of procuring the men I asked about?" he asked.

"They are already making their way, singly and in couples, to the place I selected as a rendezvous," was the reply.

"Outside the city?"

"Yes, sir. Along the road we talked about which leads away in a different direction, but from which we can get into the main road to Cretonia ahead of the count."

"Good."

"I have also to report, sir, that a covered sleigh, drawn by three horses, left the stables of Count Herbert at half-past three this morning, destination unknown. But the driver was a man named Molok, who is half-savage in some ways, and is devoted to the count. He it is who is always trusted with special missions for his master. There is no doubt of the destination of the party."

"No. Who accompanied them?"

"There were only three outriders as escort, sir."

"Could they obtain relays along the route, and still leave enough for the count on his journey?"

"They could obtain relays readily enough, for the count has horses stretched all along the route from here to the mountains. The count did not know, when he sent them out, that he would follow quite so soon; but you will remember, sir, that as soon as he left the king this morning he sent out horsemen to prepare relays for himself. I think it is to give those horsemen an opportunity to fill their orders that he has delayed his own departure until so late this afternoon."

"Without doubt you are right, captain. It is now ten minutes after one—and we must eat."

"I have been thinking rather seriously about that matter myself," laughed the prince.

"I have taken the liberty, your royal highness," said Hensau, "to direct Emile to have a hearty luncheon served for you and Marshal Carter in your cabinet at once. It will be ready by now, sir."

"Good. That was thoughtful of you."

"And I have directed my orderly to provide enough for the journey so that your highness and the marshal——"

"Stick to my name, if you please, Hensau. It suits me better," said Nick.

"Very well, sir. So that none of you need be hungry while traveling."

At that moment the door through which Zita had disappeared was thrown open, and she stood upon the threshold smiling at them; and they could only gaze upon her in surprised wonder, for the revelation was astounding.

She had donned the uniform of a young officer of the palace guard, which fitted her perfectly, and over her shoulders she had thrown a cloak which reached almost to the floor. With the cap set jauntily on one side of her shapely head, and with the saucy smile with which she greeted them, she made about the most bewitching apparition that could be imagined.

And behind her, a little distance in the rear, stood Annette, also arrayed in a uniform of the guards, only hers represented that of an orderly.

"Talk about the daughter of the regiment!" exclaimed Nick. "Countess, you are a wonder."

"Oh, it isn't the first time I have been told that," she retorted.

"And you are even more beautiful than I thought you were," said the prince.

"That is not original, either, your highness. How soon do we start?"

"At once. As soon as Mr. Carter and I have eaten. You have breakfasted this morning, Zita, I suppose?"

"Yes; just before you and Mr. Carter came to me here. I will not need anything now."

"Then," said Nick, "I suggest, since it is decided that you are to accompany us, that you go now with Captain Hensau—you and Annette—and that the prince and I join you later, at the appointed place of meeting. Tell me how to find it, Hensau."

"The rendezvous is at the park gate of Baron von Kraemer. His royal highness will know how to guide you there, sir."

"Good. At what time are the men to be there?"

"Most of them are there by now, sir. They will all be on hand by half-past one."

"And how soon can we dispose of our luncheon and get there, prince?"

"Before two. Come, Countess—or, rather, Captain Zita, I salute you."

"And I," said the detective; and they turned away.

"The idea of her going with us seemed to me to be preposterous, when she first suggested it," said the prince, as they walked along the corridors of the palace together, "but I am now very glad that she is going, for Deehra's sake."

"And I, also, Rupert. She is a remarkable young woman, don't you think so?"

"I never saw her equal," said the prince enthusiastically.

It was exactly two o'clock when Nick Carter and the prince joined the others at the place of rendezvous, at the gate to Baron von Kraemer's park.

It happened to be in the midst of a wood on a road that was not much frequented, and for that reason had been selected by the young captain of the guards.

There were twenty men there in waiting, not counting the captain himself—and, naturally, not counting Zita and Annette; and so, all told, the exact number of persons who rode away over the wintry roads that afternoon was twenty-five.

And the day was beautiful; cold but still, and with the keenness taken out of the frost by the bright sun which shone upon them.

Before they started, the detective called Hensau to him.

"You must act as guide, and take personal command of the troop, notwithstanding the presence of the prince and myself," he said to him.

"But you will give me some general orders, sir, will you not?"

"Yes. You know already what I wish to do."

"Yes, sir; but after we reach the main road to Cretonia—what then?"

"First, what time are we likely to do that?"

"By the route we will take, I have calculated that we should come out upon the main road at about the edge of evening; a little before or a little after it is dark tonight."

"Splendid. Make it a little after, even if you have to hold back. It will be dark by five o'clock; no?"

"Yes, sir."

"How many miles, on the main road, will we be in advance of Count Herbert, then? In other words, how many miles from Breslin on that road will we be when we enter it?"

"Fifteen; but we will have to travel nearly thirty miles to make it."

"I understand that. Now, beyond that point, along the main road, where is a good place, according to your recollection, to encounter the count and his escort?"

"Is it your intention to intercept them to-night, sir?"

"I had thought of doing so. Have you anything else to offer?"

"This, sir. We can cross the main road at that point, and take another road that runs parallel to it, a mile and a half beyond. It is not so good, but then we are mounted, and will not mind that as we would if we were on wheels."

"No."

"We can travel faster than the count, although not greatly so, but we will be able to reach a place which his highness knows quite well, called 'The Devil's Horns.'"

"Yes," said the prince. "Excellent. I know the place well. It is in the midst of a forest, and the very place for a surprise, Nicholas."

"What time could we get there, captain?" asked the detective.

"I think, sir, by three in the morning; or four."

"And the count should still be ten or fifteen miles behind us; no?"

"All of that, sir."

"Very good. Let it be 'The Devil's Horns,' then, by all means; only I wish to be sure to arrive there enough in advance of the count to make my arrangements for the attack."

"We can do it, sir."

"Then give your orders, and let us start at once."

They rode in pairs, and it fell to Nick to ride beside the countess, who was so elated by the excitement of the expedition that she could scarcely contain herself.

"Oh, why was I not a man instead of a woman!" she cried out, after they had ridden along in comparative silence for a considerable distance.

"Because, countess——" began the detective, but she interrupted him.

"Oh, call me Zita. It is more intimate," she laughed. "And surely, after all that has passed between us, we need not stand upon ceremony."

"No."

"Now you may reply to my question, for I saw that you had a reply on the tip of your tongue."

"I was only going to suggest, Zita, that the Creator doubtless felt that a great injustice would be done did He make you anything but what you are."

"Oh! Thank you. That is a very pretty compliment indeed. Tell me; don't you think the prince is a fine gentleman?"

"The finest ever," laughed Nick.

"Mr. Carter, do you really think there will be a fight to-night?" she asked presently.

"Well, perhaps hardly a fight. But I think there will be a mix-up. The sort of thing that in my own country we would call a scrap."

"A scrap? What is that? It sounds like something good to eat."

"It is a slang word that we use to describe a fight that is not much of a fight, after all."

She was silent for a time after that, thinking; and then she said:

"I am afraid, Mr. Carter, that you do not fully appreciate the possibilities of Count Herbert von Linmark."

"Why not?"

"Because he will *fight*, not scrap. In Cretonia he is more powerful than the king himself, because his subjects are devoted to him. They are half-barbarians, anyway; only half-civilized, many of them, and they look upon him as their hereditary chief to whom they owe allegiance more than they do to the king—and they are born fighters, too. He will fight, you may depend upon that, and there will be blood spilt, and——"

"I am sorry, countess, that we consented to bring you with us. I fear that you are not so fond of a fight as you thought you were."

"I?" She laughed lightly. "I was not thinking of myself, or of you, Mr. Carter."

"Of whom, then? Of Captain Hensau, perhaps?"

"Nonsense! I was thinking of his royal highness, the prince. If anything were to happen to him——"

"Zita, the prince is a man all through. Nothing will happen to him that we can prevent."

CHAPTER XI.

THE BATTLE OF THE HIGHWAY.

To ride steadily on the back of a horse from two in the afternoon until very nearly three in the morning when the thermometer is coquetting with the zero mark is not always an enjoyable thing to do, and would not be supposed to be so under any circumstances to a young and rather delicate woman like the Countess Zita.

But she arrived at the destination, apparently, as little fatigued as any of them, nevertheless.

They had stopped twice during the journey to rest their horses, and to refresh themselves and their animals with food and drink.

It was not until after they arrived at the Devil's Horns that Nick Carter directly addressed the men under his command; but then he called them around him, and, commanding their attention, he said impressively:

"Men, you are here on a mission for his majesty, the king, and I am here to command you, as his personal representative. You are here also as appointed rescuers of Princess Deehra, whom I am sure you all respect and love."

A low murmur went around the circle, but Nick was assured that he had made no mistake.

"It is fitting that you should know something about the reasons for being here," he continued, "and in saying what I am about to utter, I am taking each of you into

my personal confidence, on behalf of his royal highness, who is here at my elbow, and of his majesty, who is within the palace at Breslin, anxiously awaiting news of this expedition. What passes here to-night, either in word or deed, must forever remain a secret in your hearts, not even to be mentioned between yourselves after it shall have occurred; but to be forgotten. Do you understand that, my men?"

"Aye, sir; aye," went the rounds of the group.

"Princess Deehra was abducted from the palace of her father, about twenty-four hours ago from the present moment. Her abductor, I have every reason to believe, was Count Herbert von Linmark. The princess was sent away, toward Castle Linmark, in the mountains of Cretonia, under the charge of one Molok, whom some of you know."

"Aye, sir, aye."

"Yesterday morning, because of another transgression of the count's, the king banished him to his castle, little suspecting at the time that the count had already sent the princess to that stronghold in the mountains. The count is only about an hour behind us on the road, and will therefore soon come up.

"It is necessary, my men, that he should not be permitted to reach his castle, for the princess will be there by such a time, and—*he must not pass this point.*

"He will have with him when he arrives here an escort about equal to our own force. When the carriage with its accompanying escort appears at the end of the road yonder I will have arranged you in equal numbers on either side of the highway, and, as the carriage approaches, I will give the word to attack.

"When I do that, you will ride out across the road in such a manner as to bar the farther progress of any of the company he has with him. I will then command them to halt in the name of the king.

"It may be that all will go well. It may be that upon being commanded to halt in the name of the king the count will obey, and will recognize the authority that I have brought here with me. It may be that he will submit himself quietly to arrest, and that all will go well from that point on; and, in that case, we will merely have to continue our journey to the castle, find the princess, and return with her to Breslin.

"But from what I have been led to believe concerning Count Herbert von Linmark, I fear that he will show resistance, even to the authority of the king, and, if he does that, we must restrain his farther progress, no matter with what cost.

"If there is a fight here in the highway, I depend upon you to show yourselves equal to it, and at all hazards to prevent Count Herbert from traveling farther on his journey.

"That is all. Captain Hensau will dispose of you now, and give you further orders, if such be necessary."

The detective watched them as they fell back, and were directed in low tones by the young captain in what they were expected to do; for young Hensau knew every man, and knew best how to place them.

Then Nick Carter turned to the prince, and to Zita and her maid, who were near him.

"Prince Rupert," he said, somewhat coldly, for he meant to be understood, "you will admit that for the moment, under the royal seal of your august brother, his majesty, the king, I am your superior officer."

The prince drew himself up stiffly, and saluted. He knew already what was coming, and he did not like it in the least; but he smiled grimly as the detective continued:

"It was at my request that your royal highness came along on this expedition. When it was inaugurated, I had no idea of the dangers that would go with it, else I should have insisted upon your remaining at the palace.

"But it is not right that your life should be endangered in this mêlée, if mêlée there should be; nor is it right that the countess and her maid should occupy a point of danger at any time. If anything should happen to your royal higness, I could never forgive myself, and so, at the risk of incurring your displeasure, I direct that you, sir, withdraw with the Countess Zita to that little cabin yonder in the woods, and that you both remain there until further orders."

All this was said in a tone so low that none but those interested could hear it; but the prince frowned darkly, and for a moment seemed about to show some of that family temper so strongly evident in the character of his brother, the king. Then he laughed.

"Look here, Nicholas," he said, "I'm going to mutiny. I'm going to disobey orders. If you think for a moment that I'm going to sit back there in that cabin and wait for the rest of you to do the fighting you are mistaken. I refuse to obey."

Nick Carter thrust out one hand in silence, but with a smile in his eyes. Then he spoke.

"I thought you would," he said. "But if you choose to disobey orders, that is your own fault."

"You expected me to do it all the time; eh?"

"Certainly. If you had obeyed that order, I would have thought that I had misread the character of the prince."

"Confound you, Nicholas! Were you trying me?"

"No. I was merely doing what I believed to be my duty. The king, if he were here, would expect and want you at the front as much as I do."

"Right. And I'll be there, too—if there is any fighting."

"Am I also expected to disobey your orders—Marshal Carter?" asked Zita, with a smile.

"No. If you do, you will cost me one of my men, for

I shall have to put a guard over you. You are to remain in that cabin till your arm is needed. When it is, you shall know it."

"Oh, well, I won't mutiny. But I shall watch closely, and if I think there is a place where I can put in a blow for Dechra, rest assured it shall fall."

"I haven't a doubt of it. But you will promise me that you will keep out of danger, won't you? Remember that you are here to give personal aid to the princess later."

"I will promise you; yes."

"That's a good girl. I am falling more and more in love with you every moment, Zita."

"Pish! If I thought you were——"

"Well?"

"I think I would begin to consider the necessary steps to become an American citizen."

"There is only one—for a woman, you know; one that is really necessary."

"And we are not considering that one, are we?"

"No, countess; not at present."

Captain Hensau came up at that moment.

"The carriage is approaching, sir," he announced. "It is less than a mile away."

"Good. Have you disposed your men as you want them?"

"Yes, sir."

"Countess, will you seek the cabin now, if you please."

He rode out into the middle of the highway for an instant, glancing over the men who were drawn up on either side of it.

"Let every man be ready now," he said, in a tone that all could hear.

"Aye, sir," came the reply from every tongue.

"No man among you is to move until you see me do so; but when I ride into the road, you are to spread across it as you have been directed to do by your captain. Attention, now, all!"

They could hear the beat of the horses' shod feet upon the hard, frozen road-bed by now, and also the occasional shouts of the drivers; and then the cavalcade, with the great Pullman sleigh in its midst, dashed into sight around a bend of the road, a hundred yards away.

They were coming along at a swinging pace, evidently with no thought of interruption in their minds.

They were thirty yards distant when Nick Carter spurred his horse into the middle of the road, and, stopping directly before them, cried out in a loud voice:

"Halt! Halt in the name of his majesty the king!"

As he uttered the command, his men rode out behind him and formed across the road in a double line; and, as they did so, Prince Rupert spurred his horse up beside Nick's.

As the command uttered by the detective rang out sharply upon the night air, the horsemen in advance of the sleigh pulled up quickly until their horses sat back on their haunches; and, as they did so, the driver of the horses attached to the sleigh also pulled in on his wheel-horses.

But they had not yet come to a stop when a hood at the top of the body of the conveyance was thrown open, and the face of Count Herbert appeared. Then his head and half his body showed through the opening, and he called out in a voice that might have been heard a mile.

"Drive on! Forward, men! Cut your way through, if necessary! On! On! *On!* Charge them!"

"In the name of the king—*halt!*" shouted Nick Carter again.

"Forward!" yelled the count; and he discharged a pistol over the heads of his own men to give them courage and to spur them onward.

"In the name of the king!" called out the prince, who knew that his voice would be recognized.

"Forward, men!" cried Nick, in the same breath.

"Haaaa!" yelled the count again, with a long-drawn intonation. "The prince and the American. Fight them, my bullies! Fight them! Cut them down! Cut your way through them! Fight for Cretonia, and for your chief."

In an instant all was confusion.

There were many pistols discharged, and at least two men within view of Nick fell from their saddles. The men of the palace guard pressed forward, and with their sabers tried to cut their way through the escort to the vehicle in which the count was a passenger.

More pistol-shots, the clashing of steel against steel, the scream of a wounded horse, the hoarse shouts of the struggling men—all made up a scene of confusion better imagined than described.

In the midst of it Nick Carter saw Count Herbert leap out through the hood in the top of the vehicle; saw him spring to the ground and seize upon a horse that was already riderless; saw him leap upon its back, and, with a pistol in either hand, firing right and left, saw him dash into the thickest of the fight—and then he felt a sharp blow at the side of his head, and he reeled from the saddle to the frozen ground, almost under his horse's feet.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DUEL ON HORSEBACK.

Nick Carter bounded up again like a rubber ball, for the blow had only dazed him for the instant; but already the fight had swept over him and was continuing just beyond, between him and the now deserted vehicle.

His first thought was for the prince, and he saw him at once, fighting manfully among the men, and still, to all appearance, unharmed.

His second thought was for Count Herbert, who was

on no account be permitted to escape; but already the man had disappeared—where, the detective could not imagine.

Then, when he would have dashed forward into the thick of the fight again, he was amazed to see Zita disentangle herself from the mêlée of men and come running toward him.

"I thought you were killed," she cried out, and caught her breath; and then, almost without noticeable pause, she added: "Quick! He has escaped. He went that way, by the main road!"

"Count Herbert?" asked Nick.

"Yes. Quick! Get horses. I know a short cut through the mountains, if we can get through. We can cut him off before he reaches the castle. Horses! Horses! For you, for me, and for Annette. She knows the way even better than I."

There were any number of riderless horses dashing about by this time, and even as he started forward to secure one, the countess called out to him:

"Remember, their horses are fresh. They changed them not three miles back on the road."

He had thought of that already, but he was surprised that it should have occurred to the countess. He was beginning to think that she was a young woman of wonderful resource.

At that very instant two of the horses of the other party dashed toward them, and Nick had no difficulty in stopping them, and, as he threw himself into the saddle of one of them, he heard the countess call out:

"Count Herbert's favorites. His best horses;" and he saw her vault into the other saddle with all the ease of a circus-rider.

"Come!" he called out to her. "If you are to guide me, lead on! The count must not arrive at the castle. *He shall not!*"

"Annette!" she called out.

"We have no time to wait for Annette."

"She is coming. She has found a horse for herself. Ah, good Annette!"

A wounded guard came staggering back toward them at that moment; and Nick called out to him:

"Tell your captain, as soon as he has won the fight, to follow by the main road, and not to stop till he overtakes us, or reaches the castle! Now, Zita, that man has, at least, ten minutes' start of us. Are you sure that you know a short cut?"

"Yes; if we can get through."

"If there is any doubt of it——" he began; but at that instant the maid Annette dashed past them and called out:

"This way! Follow me! I will show you the way!" and at a gallop she flashed into a narrow pathway through the forest which bore off almost at right angles to the road.

For a moment—but for a moment only—the detective hesitated. He doubted the expediency of taking the long chance that they could get through the forest road; but, then, gritting his teeth, he dashed on after the two women, maid and mistress, both of whom were in advance of him, and ten minutes later they entered a ravine, where all sounds of the battle they had left behind them were lost.

The pathway widened presently, and Zita dropped back beside him. It was a strange situation, indeed, for him to be in, fleeing in the darkness, lighted only by the waning moon, along that mountain gorge, with one woman as a guide and another, the beautiful countess, as a fighting companion. He smiled grimly to himself as he thought of it. She saw his smile, and correctly interpreted it.

"Annette was born in these mountains," she said. "She knows every inch of them. If any one could take you through she can; and we have the three best horses that belonged to the count's stables. Oh, tell me, were you injured when you were knocked from the saddle?"

"No," said Nick. "I had forgotten it."

"My heart stood still when I saw you fall," she said simply; but she glanced toward him with shining eyes, then added, with a strange little shudder: "I shot the man who struck you from behind with the butt of his pistol."

"You shot him?" repeated Nick wonderingly.

"Yes. Come; Annette is getting ahead of us."

They spurred forward in silence after that, and they went up, and up, and up, winding in and out along ravines, now crossing a hogback to another one, and now galloping across a flat space between others; and Annette rode like a Cossack, or like an Indian of the American plains, never seeming to doubt her way, or to question her ability to accomplish what she had set out to perform.

Save for an occasional word about their route, Nick and Zita followed in silence; and it was an hour and a half later, just at dawn, when they rode down a steep bank and came out upon the highway again; and here, like the true mountaineer that she was, Annette threw herself from the saddle and began to examine the roadway.

"We have beaten him," she said presently. "He has not passed here yet. But he cannot be far away."

Nor was he, for even as Annette spoke, they heard the sound of the hoof-beats of his approaching horse; and then, for the first time since they undertook that strange ride, Nick was reminded of the fact that he was unarmed; that he had not a weapon to use.

"Here! Take this!" called Zita; and she pulled the dress sword that belonged with the uniform she wore from its scabbard and gave it, hilt first, into his hand;

and even as she did so, Count Herbert dashed around the embankment and came upon them.

Instantly he pulled in his tired horse, but already Nick was riding forward to meet him, and in that instant the count saw who it was that confronted him, and also saw and recognized Nick's companions.

He uttered a great laugh, and raised his pistol deliberately, and pulled the trigger. But, like Nick's weapons, its usefulness was past. Every cartridge had been exploded.

With a curse he threw it from him and pulled his own sword, longer by a third than the one Zita had given Nick; and then the two men came together, there on that mountain road, with the deep gorge on one side of them, the ascending mountain on the other, and the narrow highway stretching away in either direction, and with the first light of the morning sun gleaming upon the blades of their swords as they crashed together.

"The king's special!" called out the count tauntingly.

"For the honor of Princess Deehra!" exclaimed the detective, in reply; and he made a veritable whirlwind of light around his head with his sword as he attacked the count, for in all the world there is none more expert with the rapier than Nick Carter.

The count made a desperate lunge at Nick Carter's throat with his blade, and the latter parried it en tierce; and then, almost before the detective realized it, the little weapon given him by Zita passed through the count's body, and he fell backward from his horse's back to the frozen ground of the highway.

It was all over so quickly that Nick was for an instant dazed; but he leaped to the road at once and knelt beside the count; and Zita dropped from the saddle also, and came to his assistance, so that presently, when the count opened his eyes, he saw the faces of both of them bending over him; but already Nick had torn away the count's clothing, and with the assistance of the countess was stanching the blood in the wound and binding it.

The intense cold of the early morning was their best aid in that work, and it was, in fact, to that very thing that the count ultimately owed his life; but he thought then that he was dying.

"You have done for me, Carter," he gasped. "You and Zita together. Ah, Heavens! How a thrust like that one paralyzes. The king will execrate me forever now. Well, I am sorry. I have always been a wild fool, impossible of restraint. There is a taint of wildness in my blood. We were border robbers once, we Limmarks. Tell Deehra that I'm sorry; and yet I would not have held myself had I lived. And the king? I suppose he has already condemned me to death. So! I am glad that you gave me the stroke, Carter."

"The king does not know," said Nick simply, for he, too, doubted then if the count could live half an hour.

"Not know? You did not tell him?"

"No."

"That was good of you. Perhaps"—wistfully—"now that I am dying, he need not know."

"Perhaps not. We will see about that, Count Herbert."

"Zita"—the count turned his eyes toward the countess—"will you give me your hand. I want you to forgive——" He got no further than that, for he quietly lapsed into unconsciousness; and to Nick's amazement, Countess Zita burst into a fit of weeping, and, dropping upon the ground, took the count's head in her lap, while she bent her face over him and sobbed.

And so the prince and Captain Hensau, with twelve of the twenty men who had accompanied them to the mountains, found them when, less than half an hour later, they arrived on the scene, for they came pounding along the highway toward the castle in obedience to the directions that Nick had left with the wounded guard.

* * * * * * *

For the rest there is little more to tell. Of the escort of the count, only five had been left uninjured, and they had fled through the mountains to get away from the vengeance of the palace guards.

Presently the sleigh was brought up, the wounded count was put inside it with the others who were badly injured, and so the journey to the castle was taken up again, and in due time was finished.

Princess Deehra was at Castle Linmark, uninjured, of course. Old Molok had not relished the duty that had been given him, and had done everything possible for his princess, so that she and her companion were well taken care of; but she was, nevertheless, very glad indeed to rest her tired head upon the breast of her uncle, the prince, and to greet her dear friend Zita and Nick Carter, again.

Count Herbert's sleigh was requisitioned for the return journey, and with the assurances from the old physician at the castle that the count would recover, it was begun.

Upon the return of the princess to the palace in Breslin we will not comment here. It is sufficient to state that, owing to the masterly efforts of the detective, nothing was known of the affair outside the few who were directly concerned in it.

When the king thanked the detective for what he had done, he said, among other things:

"Mr. Carter, the Order of the Golden Eagle that I pinned on your breast must remain there, if you will accept it; and, with it, I give you my friendship and my affection."

THE END.

The next number of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY (591) will be "The Princess' Last Effort; or, Nick Carter Wields a Royal Scepter."

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TALKS WITH OUR READERS.

"Gun mob" is simply English thieves' slang for a pickpocket and his gang of confederates—"gentlemen" who reap an annual harvest of anything they can lay their hands upon in a crowd. Summer time, when race courses, athletic grounds and seaside places are crowded, is the pickpocket's favorite and most profitable season.

At one time the modern detective was apt to despise the pickpocket somewhat, characterizing him as a low and not particularly clever thief. His ingenuity, daring and coolness to-day, however, "compel our admiration," to quote one of the cleverest detectives, "and we feel pleased when we lay one of them by the heels."

The pickpocket's tricks are many and various, and he is adding to their number every day. The false arm game is one of the cleverest and is calculated to deceive a detective, even although he may have his eyes on the operator. A coat is thrown loosely over a false arm, which is held naturally. Apparently both of the pickpocket's hands are in view, while in reality the skilful fingers of one hand are going through the pockets of the man beside him.

The use of the pocketless overcoat, or the cape coat, which makes an entire cover for the hands, is an old dodge, which nevertheless is still popular with the pickpocket. He often prefers, however, to use a novel invention known as the sash method. The sash consists of a piece of black silk or alpaca two yards long and three-quarters wide. It is folded the same as a neck scarf and crossed centrally beneath the coat and vest, both ends being brought under the arms and placed in the hip pockets of the trousers. When ready for action the "tool," as the man is called who actually picks the pocket, places his hands behind the folds of this device, and it enables him to conceal his purpose as he "fronts" a man to rob him of his watch or money if the latter is in his trousers pocket.

A "tool," however, has other means of covering his hands without resorting to the aid of coat or sash. A newspaper or theater program is often used. Beware of looking over a stranger's shoulder to glance at a newspaper or program—a little action we are often guilty of when it only necessitates a turn of the head. You may be risking nothing, but, on the other hand, you may be seated or standing by the side of a professional pickpocket, who has only to hold the paper at a certain angle while you are engrossed in some item to cover his movements as he relieves you of your valuables.

The black silk handkerchief and hat are employed in the same manner as the paper, only the former is sometimes used in the "sling method" to carry a supposedly crippled arm. The manner in which that arm would rest against your face, as if raised to avoid some one striking it, while the other hand took your scarfpin and watch would excite compassion from the victim himself.

The pickpocket's most dastardly trick—but one, be it noted, which is only used by the man who is too clumsy to perform that sleight of hand upon which the clever thief prides himself—is that of blinding the victim with pepper blown through a pipe. The bowl of the latter is filled with a false bottom and second tube, the cavity below the false bottom being filled with cayenne pepper, while tobacco is placed above it. Approaching a gentleman in an ill-lighted street, the thief asks for a light for his pipe, and while the victim feels for his matches he is suddenly blinded by a discharge of cayenne pepper, which the scoundrel blows through the hole in the bottom of the pipe into his eyes. Maddened with the terrible pain, the victim presses his hands to his eyes, and the robber snatches his watch and chain and decamps, to repeat his exploit on some other unsuspecting pedestrian.

It is not very often, however, that the pickpocket works alone, although women who belong to the light-fingered fraternity—and who, by the way, are often more successful than men—usually prefer to do so. Men thieves like to work in "mobs," for the simple reason that they can transfer the "boodle" from one to the other in a crowd. Consequently if recognized by a detective and arrested on suspicion there is nothing in their possession on which they can be convicted.

Besides, confederates—or "stalls," as they are called in the vernacular of the "profession"—are necessary to do that little bit of hustling which makes the "tool's" task so much easier and lessens the risk of detection.

Many are doubtless aware that train termini in busy thoroughfares are places where the pickpocket is always looking for plunder, and a "mob" of four will often work together in such a crowd. A prosperous-looking victim is selected, and as he attempts to board the car the four quickly surround him, with the "artist" behind.

The confederate in front uses every subterfuge to block the progress of the victim until the coup has been brought off, and while the men on each side hem him in and distract his attention with their hustling the man behind helps himself from his pockets. It is a trick which rarely fails with cool, expert thieves, although amateurs at the game are often caught through lack of nerve and quickness.

The "stall" or confederate will not allow any one who has been chosen for a victim to change his position until a

peculiar cluck tells him the trick has been accomplished or unless there has been an alarm from an outside source. When more than one "stall" is used the other men devote part of their attention to watching any of the passengers who may be inclined to suspect mischief, and with their boot toe in close proximity to that of the "tool" they can convey a danger signal without fear of attracting the least attention. When such a signal reaches the "tool" he will desist in his attempt at plunder, and, though he has never turned his head to see who prevented larceny, he will completely lull the suspicions of the same individual by his manner thereafter.

Generally speaking, the profits of pickpocketing are not worth the risk. Occasionally thieves make a good haul, but often great risk is run to secure a man's pocketbook, for instance, only to find that it is simply filled with cards and memoranda.

Hard cash is what the pickpocket likes to secure. For jewelry he can only get about one-half of what it is worth from the fence, while for watches he rarely gets more than one-fourth. Consequently the professional pickpocket must be industrious to earn a livelihood.

Have you ever noticed the marks upon the highway? There are marks of men, of animals, and of many kinds of wheels. A fair has been held in the neighborhood, and the tracks in the road are countless and of all sorts.

Pick out from them the shoe-prints of the horse-thief who has sneaked a colt from the sale ring! The Khoji of Northern India can do this. He knows the footprints of every person in his district as we know the faces of our friends.

One of these matchless trackers had hunted a criminal to the banks of a river. A rajah had just crossed the river with two hundred of his people at his important heels. In the midst of all these footprints the Khoji lost the ones he had been following.

Back he went for several miles to the spot at which he had first picked up the trail. Again he pursued it, and came the second time to the river's edge. He crossed the river, and there amid the footprints of all the rajah's retinue the terrible Khoji saw those that had escaped him on the further bank.

We read such things and think of the magician in the "Nights," who, with his ear laid to earth, distinguished among the myriad footfalls of Asia those of the youth that should lead him to the Lamp.

The detective's life is not infrequently pictured as being an extremely attractive and interesting one, but those who know the drudgery of his employment, not to mention the risk to life and limb, tell a very different tale.

Fancy the awful monotony of watching one house day after day for weeks together, and this sometimes when obliged to lie at full length in a wretched garret or hay-loft.

Yet such work is frequent in the career of a detective officer, and woe be to him if the man he wants escapes his vigilance, and is known by the detective's superior officer to have left the house undetected.

There is no stated hour when a detective's work ceases—that is, when he is on an important case. Sometimes for nights together he is out in the wet and cold, standing in a draughty passage, maybe, waiting for the return home of a man who is wanted.

Many other instances of the detective's arduous duties might be cited, all of which would go to prove that his lot is a far from pleasant one.

Cheating by electricity is an accomplishment by which a clever scoundrel has been fleecing many wealthy gamblers in Paris of thousands of pounds.

He played roulette with them, but played it in a way that would have outraged the honesty of the heathen Chinee. For the roulette-table which he used was as full of electricity as a thunder-storm; and while the other fellows were just gambling, he was rooking them all the time with the assistance of invisible electric currents.

The roulette-wheel contained a network of electrical wires, so arranged that by the manipulation of switches carefully concealed inside the cash-drawer, or by the apparently careless placing of a stack of chips or counters in a certain spot, electro-magnets concealed within the very structure of the wheel itself would be so thrown into circuit as to draw the ball, which contained a soft iron core, into any group of pockets the dealer might desire.

MY FIRST SHARK.

BY T. M. FRANCIS.

Every disciple of good old Izaak Walton, from the wealthy owner or lessee of a salmon river, down to the urchin who angles with rudely improvised tackle in the nearest brook or canal, can look back on at least one red-letter day, when *the* fish of the season was triumphantly landed. I have fished for many years in various parts of the world, and my calendar can boast of many such days; but the reddest letter of all is that set against a certain day in 1857, when I was a small boy on my first voyage, and hooked my first shark.

It was on board a big sailing-vessel. For any one who is a fairly good sailor, is fond of natural history, and has plenty of time to spare, I can imagine nothing more pleasant than such a voyage—provided, of course, that one's fellow passengers and the officers of the ship are a decent lot of people. Being himself an old sailor, my father rigged me out with a complete set of sea-fishing tackle, carefully selected by himself, and, in many cases, tied and arranged with his own hands. Chief among this was a shark hook, with four or five feet of steel chain attached to it, the whole having been carefully made and tempered under my father's own supervision. Then he produced from his storeroom—which was a perfect treasure-house of nautical odds and ends—a length of thin, but very strong, rope, made of Manila

hemp, a sailor's knife, and a marlinespike. In a very few minutes there was a cunningly contrived loop, or eye, at each end of the rope, one of them being rove through a ring at the end of the steel chain.

"There, my boy!" said my father, surveying his handiwork, "that ought to hold any ordinary shark, if you have the good luck to run across one. But, whatever you do, on no account tackle a shark single-handed, or he will most likely haul you overboard. Make friends with the officers, and get one of them to make your line fast to the running rigging, so that you may have something to veer and haul on. Don't fish except when the ship is becalmed, or barely making headway. Keep a sharp lookout for pilot-fish, as they generally cruise in company with a shark. Fish near the stern-post, if you can get leave to do so, and sing out for help the moment you see the bait taken."

Then he told me of sharks and other sea-fish which he had caught during his many voyages, and we had one of those sea-talks in which all boys delight.

But I shall never get to my shark at this rate. Behold me, then, bending over the stern of the good ship *Flyaway* as she lay becalmed, and peering down into the dark-blue, glassy depths below. My tackle was all rigged up, and the hook duly baited with a lump of pork, which the ship's cook had good-naturedly fished out of the harness-cask for me, putting it into a bucket, so as not to grease the decks.

All sorts of curious little fish were playing round the stern, and I noticed that now and then a shoal of them came darting up from the depths, as if scared by some monster below. Presently there came up two curiously striped fish, which I recognized from my father's description as pilot-fish; so I at once seized my shark tackle and lowered the baited hook into the sea.

First one pilot-fish and then another approached, and seemed to sniff at the lump of pork. Then they dived under the keel and out of sight, while I watched, with beating heart, to see what would happen next.

I had not long to wait. Up from the depths of the sea came rushing a huge, dark mass—there was a gleam of white as the shark turned over on his side—and my baited hook disappeared in a cavernous pair of jaws, thickly set with rows of serrated teeth!

I yelled lustily for help, and several of the officers and crew came rushing aft. A glance at the tightly strained rope told them what had happened, and half a dozen brawny Jacks clapped onto the tackle at once. The shark fought desperately, and the sailors were leaning backward with all their might, having a regular tug of war—when the huge fish came shooting straight up like an arrow out of the depths, and, the rope being thus suddenly slackened, down came all the Jacks in a heap, with language which was "frequent, and painful, and free." The shark glared up at me for an instant, as if to say: "You little beast! I wish I had you down here!" and dived back into the depths as swiftly as he had emerged, dragging out the rope after him "no allowance," as sailors say.

But his triumph was not for long. The men scrambled up and clapped onto the rope again, with clenched teeth, and a look of grim determination that boded ill for their enemy. Step by step they worked stubbornly along toward the gangway; and, though the shark struggled with tremendous force, they were determined not to let him get the weather-gage again. At last, one of the topmen threw a rope, with a bowline knot at the end, over the creature's tail, and, with a gigantic heave at the two ropes, which held him by bow and stern, the shark was hoisted over the ship's side and thrown with a heavy thud on the quarter-deck.

All that had gone before was mere child's play to what followed. Whack! whack! whack! went the shark's tail, and at every whack a man was sent flying out of the mêlée, one or two of them being fairly knocked out of time and obliged to take a back seat. Not a man dare go near the terrible jaws which were snapping and clashing like a huge steel trap; but they had to keep clear of the tail as well, for, unlike a tin tack, a shark has two business ends, and his tail is almost as formidable a weapon as his jaws.

For a short time it seemed as if the shark were completely master of the situation; but at a word from the chief officer, the men rushed aft to the ship's armory, and speedily returned to the charge, armed with cutlases, axes, or boarding-pikes. The fight was resumed, and the shark was soon bleeding from a dozen wounds; but he still dealt tremendous blows with his tail, while his jaws snapped in all directions. At last a sailor rushed up with one of the capstan-bars and thrust it almost down the shark's throat, shouting:

"There! bite on that, ye lubber!"

The terrible jaws closed on it like a vise, and almost at the same instant a cutlas came slashing down on the shark's tail and severed it from the body.

This blow ended the fight, and the rest was comparatively plain sailing. Three or four men pinned the shark's body down on the quarter-deck, while others chopped off his head. My hook and chain were torn out of the body, and it was dragged off to the ship's galley. In a very short time, every frying-pan and gridiron in the ship was frizzling away merrily. While this was going on, one of the men brought me the shark's heart, which was still pulsating strongly. Then my friend, the big topman, came up grinning, and presented me with a choice portion of grilled shark, from which I turned in disgust, expressing my wonder that they could eat such a brute.

"Why, bless ye, sir!" exclaimed the topman, in surprise, "the beggar'd ha' eaten *we* fast enough if so be he got the chance—why on earth shouldn't us eat *he*?"

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